

# Times of Upheaval

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## Four Medievalists *in* Twentieth-Century Central Europe

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CONVERSATIONS WITH

**Jerzy Kłoczowski**  
**János M. Bak**  
**František Šmahel**  
and **Herwig Wolfram**

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*Edited by*

Pavína Rychterová · Gábor Klaniczay · Paweł Kras · Walter Pohl

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Central European University Press

*Budapest – New York*

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# Introduction

*History is a good teacher, only she does not have any students.*

—Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*

Not long ago historians were regarded as professionals able to initiate and guard the process of collective self-reflection, in which one's own past and its interpretation played a crucial role. Today, however, the skepticism of Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann has a new urgency—the lessons of the past seem to be forgotten. Historians such as Timothy Snyder try to invigorate public sensibility towards threatened democratic values. “Alternative facts” sway people's views while professional historians are heard less and less. Economists and members of political think tanks often take over debates about the past, using history as a coat rack on which they hang their own stories of future promises. Over the last forty years members of the mass media have enhanced their public role as experts, embellishing what they cover. Yet the recent fragmentation of traditional media has led this kind of expert opinion to lose its public authority as well. Now, internet bubbles create their own truths. Historians find themselves in the position of Cassandra, whose warnings are neither given attention nor understood. This is partly because these warnings lack simplicity and therefore seem to lack urgency, and partly because historiography is an interpretative discipline and historians are trained to doubt their own narratives. Historians are also political individuals with economic interests like anybody else. They are sometimes motivated to accommodate social expectations in order to increase their own prestige and obtain economic and social benefits. And of course, many historians in the past threw themselves into the service of oppressive regimes, legitimating their ideas as well as their deeds. There is no guarantee that this will not happen again.

## Times of Upheaval

History needs not only good students but also excellent teachers. Its interpreters carry great responsibility. History allows us to understand the world around us and our place in it. Our view of the past, or rather our interpretation of it, shapes our world and the way in which societies approach problems, anxieties, and crises. Historiography has accompanied politics at least from the beginning of the nineteenth century, providing tools for emerging national ideologies and for the self-representation of the national state. These political roles increased immensely the potential of historiography to generate important models for trans-local social identification. Well into the twentieth century in most European countries, and at least to the end of the last millennium in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, discourses of national, politically motivated historiographies determined the themes, methods, and theoretical approaches of historical research. These nationally defined historiographies only started to change dramatically after World War II, when historians faced great challenges in both democratic and Soviet-controlled Europe.

The question of the historian and his work in postwar East Central Europe, a region united to a large extent under the Habsburg monarchy and divided by the Iron Curtain after World War II, stands at the center of this book. It contains extensive conversations with four masters of medieval studies from four Central European countries who were born in the late 1920s or early 1930s: János Bak from Hungary, Jerzy Kłoczowski from Poland, František Šmahel from the Czech Republic, and Herwig Wolfram from Austria. They were interviewed either by their former students or by younger colleagues familiar with their work and careers. All of them have engaging life stories to tell: growing up in the years before and during the war, living under Nazi occupation, emerging as young scholars in the difficult postwar period, and, for most of their careers, working in the shadow of the Iron Curtain, where two of them spent most of their lives under communist regimes. To some extent, 1989 marked a *caesura* in all of their lives and careers. The conversations therefore focus on ways in which open-minded young intellectuals became medieval historians under difficult circumstances, on how they experienced the long shadows of totalitarian regimes with their acute sensitivity for historical change,

and how their perceptions of the world around them led them to reflect on their approaches to medieval history. The histories of their nations were broken during their lifetimes. The states in which they lived ceased to exist and were re-established, came under foreign domination, and were split apart or had their territories shifted. What did all that mean for their identities and patriotic feelings? And how did those events influence their interest in medieval ethnicity and identities, in revolutions and historical disruptions, in injustice and human suffering? How can the present be reflected in the distant mirror of the medieval past? These four masters of their profession have inspired numerous other historians, students, and the general public with their teaching and publications. In this book, they reflect about their lives and shed light on their circumstances by sharing observations, anecdotes, and experiences.

Jerzy Kłoczowski was born in Bogdany, Masuria, Poland, in 1924. During the war, he was a member of the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) and fought in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, where he lost his right hand. He became a professor at the University of Lublin and worked extensively on Church history and late medieval East Central Europe. From the late 1970s he taught abroad at the Collège de France, Oxford, the Sorbonne, and other universities, and he served on the board of UNESCO. As a member of Solidarność, he became a member of the Polish Senate after 1989 and was deeply involved in the process of postcommunist transformation, but also in the rifts that it created. He is a representative of a generation of Polish academics and intellectuals who managed to preserve a critical spirit under the communist regime and were committed to public service afterwards. The interview was conducted by his former pupil Paweł Kras.

János Bak was born in Budapest in 1929 into a Jewish family, and survived World War II and Nazi occupation in hiding. He served as a teacher under the communist regime and emigrated in 1956. His academic career took him to several countries, until he became a professor at the University of British Columbia in 1968, from where he retired in 1990. He worked on Hungarian law, rulership, and historiography in Central Europe, and co-edited a volume on the revolution of 1956. Returning to his home country in 1993, he became a professor at the new-

ly founded Central European University in Budapest, where he played a key role in turning the Department of Medieval Studies into an international hub that helped to educate a new generation of Central and Eastern European historians. He is professor emeritus since 2004. The interview was conducted by Gábor Klaniczay, his younger colleague at Central European University.

František Šmahel was born in Trhová Kamenice, a small market town in the Czechoslovak Republic, in 1934. He belonged to a Czech middle class family that was a target of persecution after the Communist Party seized power in 1948. Therefore, he had to work in a North Bohemian coal mine to get permission for his university studies. In the early 1960s, he became a researcher at the Historical Institute in Prague. Involved in the events of the Prague Spring in 1968, he participated in the compilation of the so-called “Black Book” of the Soviet occupation at the Institute. After its dissolution, he worked several years as a streetcar driver and later at the Museum of the Hussite Movement in Tábor. During these years he wrote several seminal monographs about the Hussite Revolution. After 1990, he became a professor at Charles University and one of the leading members of the Czech Academy of Sciences, where he engaged in institutional reform and taught a new generation of Czech medievalists. The interview was conducted by his former pupil Pavlína Rychterová.

Herwig Wolfram was born in Vienna in 1934. One of his earliest memories is of acts of violence on the day of Austria's *Anschluss* to Nazi Germany. He studied in postwar Vienna, when the city was still under the spell of its recent past, and soon became critical of the continuing chauvinism. This environment also influenced his critiques of essentialist concepts of peoplehood and of Germanophile interpretations of the early medieval migration period. A year spent as a visiting professor at UCLA in 1968–69 proved crucial to his intellectual development, not least because of the inspiring contacts with many colleagues who had emigrated from Central Europe after 1933. The experience in the United States also helped him in his efforts to open up the conservative and hierarchical atmosphere at the University of Vienna, where he became Professor of Medieval History in 1969. Soon after, he also established contacts with colleagues beyond the Iron Curtain, orga-

nizing academic meetings and exchanges and doing what he could to provide hope. The interview was conducted by his former pupil and successor Walter Pohl, with the help of Max Diesenberger and Roland Steinacher.



# Introducing

## **Jerzy Kłoczowski**

The life of Jerzy Kłoczowski represents a rich and multi-dimensional reality that reflects well the turbulent history of twentieth-century Poland. Born in 1924, just six years after the rebirth of Poland, he belongs to the first generation of Poles who could enjoy the independence regained after 123 years of the Partitions. As a young boy, he witnessed the painstaking process of the reconstruction of the Polish state, which reappeared on the map of Europe as a consequence of an unpredictable chain of events: the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy, and the turmoil in postwar Germany.

The Kłoczowski family nurtured patriotic traditions that combined the memory of the glorious past of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with the dream of Poland's independence. His grandfather Józef preserved the memory of the January Uprising of 1863–64. He had witnessed the execution of its last commander, Romuald Traugutt, on the slope of the Warsaw Citadel on 5 August 1864. Józef Kłoczowski passed down the memory of this dramatic event to his son Eugeniusz, and then to young Jerzy. The history of the uprising was not a narrative about some distant past; it made a strong impact on the whole family, and as such constituted an important element of its memory. Likewise, the family had a direct connection to Poland's struggle for independence after World War I. In 1920, Kłoczowski's uncle Kazimierz was killed in the war against Bolshevik Russia. His death at the Battle of Berezina was a painful loss for the family. His last letter became a family relic which was read aloud and left an imprint on young Jerzy. Even after eighty years, Jerzy Kłoczowski still remembered the words of farewell that his uncle had written to his mother Irena.

Like thousands of Poles his age, Jerzy Kłoczowski was raised in a vivid patriotism, which influenced his entire life. In his family the novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz remained favorite readings, stimulating the historical imagination of young men and women and providing them with models of patriotic heroes. At the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, Kłoczowski was fifteen years old. World War II entered his native village of Bogdany like a tornado, turning upside down his family's stable life. Their estate was confiscated by the Germans and the Kłoczowskis were deported to the General Governorate, the Nazi-controlled province of central and southern Poland. They settled in Zielonka, near Warsaw. During the first years of the Nazi occupation, Jerzy Kłoczowski continued his education in the High School of the Marian Fathers in Warsaw, where he passed his maturity exam. There he made first contacts with the Polish Resistance movement. In 1943 he became a soldier of the Home Army, which was the largest resistance force in German-controlled Europe with its 400,000 men and women in arms.

Jerzy Kłoczowski underwent military training, took an oath of loyalty to the Polish state, and adopted the code name Piotruś, by which he was known to other Home Army members. He became a platoon leader, and in August 1944 commanded a unit during the Warsaw Uprising. He regarded his service in the Army as a natural choice and was very proud of it. He wanted to fight for the freedom of Poland and was ready to die in combat. During the Warsaw Uprising he demonstrated outstanding bravery and leadership. From the very first days of fighting Kłoczowski was on the front line of the *Baszta* regiment. After a month of bloody fighting in the Mokotów district, his regiment was surrounded by German forces and had to break through to Śródmieście (central Warsaw). During one of the attacks on the enemy lines Kłoczowski was hit by machine gun fire, and his right hand had to be amputated. Severely wounded, he became a prisoner-of-war. Luckily, he was among the first soldiers of the Home Army to be treated in compliance with the Geneva Convention. He spent the last months of 1944 in the hospital for prisoners-of-war in Skierniewice, where he was found by his parents and taken to Zielonka. His service in the Home Army and participation in the Warsaw



Uprising influenced all his further plans. The friendships with members of the Home Army turned out to be lifelong.

His interest in history, first inspired by his parents, was later developed in high school. Adopting his nickname Piotruś (Pete) for the Home Army, Kłoczowski had in mind his distant relative Piotr, who had been killed during the Swedish Deluge of 1655–60. As soon as World War II was over, he decided to study history, and in autumn 1945 he set off for Poznań to register with the local university. The University of Poznań was one of the first to be reopened in postwar Poland. Kłoczowski belonged to a small group of students in the MA program in history there. Among his teachers were distinguished historians such as Kazimierz Tymieniecki<sup>1</sup> and Adam Skałkowski,<sup>2</sup> who introduced him to the methodology of history and trained him in research skills. Tymieniecki, a leading expert in the socio-economic history of medieval Poland, supervised Kłoczowski's MA thesis. He acquainted his student with Karol Górski,<sup>3</sup> on whose suggestion Kłoczowski started his research on the medieval history of the Friars Preachers and wrote a doctoral thesis on the Polish Dominicans in Silesia in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Published in 1956, it turned out to be a groundbreaking study on the implantation and growth of the Polish Dominican province. But the pioneering value of Kłoczowski's first book lay elsewhere. In contrast to traditional Church history, his work focused on the pastoral activities of the Dominicans and threw a new light on their role in the promotion of new forms of lay piety in late medieval Poland.

Kłoczowski's studies on Polish Dominicans opened the door for him to the milieu of leading French medievalists of that time and enabled him to get in touch with representatives of the *Annales* group. During his first visits in France in the 1960s, he gained access to recent French studies in Church history, unavailable in Polish libraries. His further research was much inspired by Gabriel Le Bras,<sup>4</sup> a great expert

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1 Kazimierz Tymieniecki (1887–1968), Polish historian.

2 Adam Skałkowski (1877–1951), Polish historian.

3 Karol Górski (1903–88), Polish historian specializing in the history of the Teutonic Order and medieval spirituality.

4 Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970), French jurist and sociologist.

on religious sociology, with whom he discussed his projects. A few years later he met Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff,<sup>5</sup> who became his good friends and collaborators. It was at that time that Kłoczowski drafted a program of complex and interdisciplinary research on the socio-religious history of Poland from the Middle Ages to the present day. This was a very broad and long-term enterprise which could not be accomplished by one man. His plans embraced the reconstruction of ecclesiastical structures in Poland (dioceses, religious houses, parishes, hospitals) and the evolution of religious practice across the centuries. To carry out this ambitious project, Kłoczowski needed a research center and a team of scholars who would share his vision and methodology. He found both at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), which had been founded in 1918 and reopened in 1945.

In 1950, immediately after earning his doctoral degree from the University of Toruń, Kłoczowski was invited to teach in Lublin. The Catholic University of Lublin was the only academic center in the Polish People's Republic that operated outside the direct supervision of the Communist Party and was granted a limited autonomy. Furthermore, in contrast to other institutes of history, it was allowed to conduct research and publish on Church history. Here, for more than half a century, Jerzy Kłoczowski was given a free hand to implement teaching programs for history students, employ scholars, and train young researchers who would cooperate with him on his research projects. In the late 1950s, he became director of the newly established Institute for Historical Geography of the Church in Poland and the leader of the research team working on the socio-religious history of Poland. After the fall of the Wall, in 1991, Kłoczowski established the Institute of East Central Europe in Lublin, which in a short time turned into a regional center for interdisciplinary research on the history and current developments of East Central Europe.

From a present-day perspective there is no doubt that most of Kłoczowski's research projects have been effectively completed. Kłoczowski himself published more than thirty books and around one thousand articles covering a wide spectrum of problems related to the

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5 Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014), French medievalist, member of the *Annales* School.

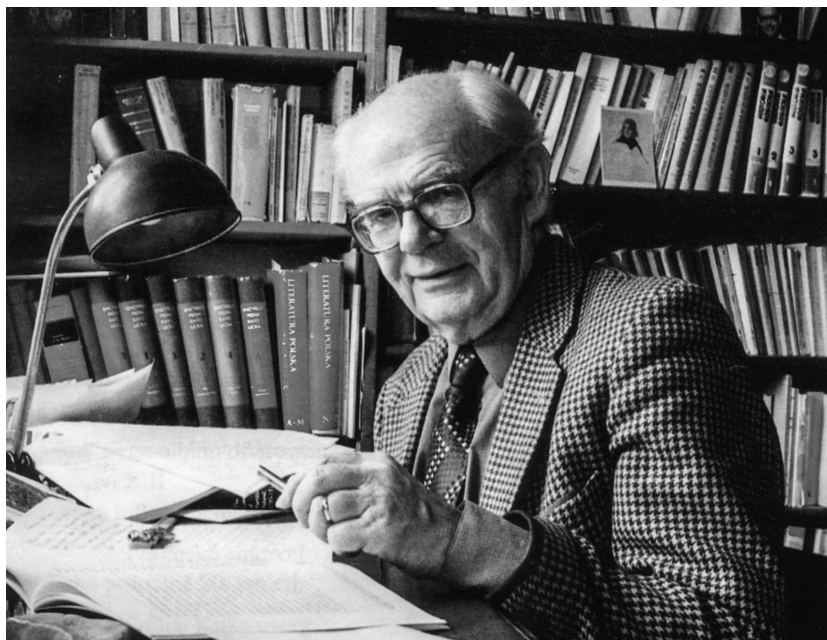
history of Christianity, monasticism, the history of Poland, and the history of East Central Europe. Alongside his own publications, he acted as initiator and editor-in-chief of numerous collective works on the history of Christianity in Poland, in particular two magisterial works: *Kościół w Polsce* (The Church in Poland)<sup>6</sup> and *Zarys dziejów chrześcijaństwa w Polsce* (An outline of the history of Christianity in Poland).<sup>7</sup> In addition, since the early 1960s Kłoczowski has been one of the most active Polish historians, establishing regular contacts with prestigious research institutions and participating in major international projects related to the history of Christianity. His name became a brand mark of high quality, and his books in French and English remain obligatory readings for any international researcher interested in the history of Polish Christianity.

Jerzy Kłoczowski did his best to promote research free of ideological bias and to encourage his students to be open-minded and critical. His work at the Catholic University of Lublin made him a target of surveillance by the communist security services. For three decades, security officers collected information on his academic activities and international contacts. In the early 1960s, they attempted unsuccessfully to recruit Kłoczowski as a secret agent. In 2004, right-wing journalists used the surveillance files to accuse Kłoczowski of collaboration with the communist security services. The attack was intended to undermine his public reputation as man of honor and high morals.

In the late 1980s, Jerzy Kłoczowski was my teacher at the Catholic University of Lublin. My decision to study at that university was inspired by his studies on monasticism, which I had read in high school. I remember Kłoczowski as a great lecturer, who had an amazing ability to attract students' attention by his knowledge and charismatic performance. In 1993, after completing my MA studies, I was offered a position at the newly established Institute of East Central Europe in Lublin, headed by Kłoczowski. For the two decades since then I have worked with him on various projects related to the interdisciplinary history of East Central Europe. This period of close cooperation let me

6 Jerzy Kłoczowski, ed., *Kościół w Polsce*, 2 vol. (Cracow: Znak, 1968–70).

7 Zbigniew Jakubowski, ed., *Zarys dziejów chrześcijaństwa w Polsce* [An outline of the history of Christianity in Poland] (Częstochowa: WSP, 1989).



Jerzy Kłoczowski

(Photo: Courtesy of the Kłoczowski family)

get to know Jerzy Kłoczowski as a man of hard work and grand vision, a brilliant mind, and a volcano of power that he has shared with his friends and collaborators.

Professor Jerzy Kłoczowski died in Warsaw on 2 December 2017, at the age of 93. He was the last living commander of Home Army units fighting in the Warsaw Uprising. His death ended an important epoch in Polish postwar historiography. Hundreds of his friends, students, and collaborators flocked to three separate funeral ceremonies in Lublin, Warsaw, and Krzynowłoga Wielka, which took place on 12–14 December, to pay tribute to the man who had an unforgettable impact on their lives and careers.

*Paweł Kras*

# Jerzy Kłoczowski

in Conversation with  
Paweł Kras

**PAWEŁ KRAS (PK):** *Thank you for taking the time to meet and talk about your encounters with history, your life and academic career, and the whole panorama of experiences that have shaped your personality as well as your outlook on the past. For my generation and for me personally, you are a symbol, a person worthy of his own memorial. Your life is a mirror that allows us to see the history of Poland in the twentieth century. You are a historian who devoted so much of his effort and passion to researching a vast number of issues in European and Polish history. In addition, you are my teacher and my master, who taught me how to be a historian—both when I was a student of history at the Catholic University of Lublin, but also when I started to work as a young academician. You were my first mentor. Thanks to our cooperation at the Institute of East Central Europe, I had a chance to be introduced to the world of Polish and international research. For the majority of your associates and students, you are a giant who keeps the whole world on his shoulders and takes us all higher so that we can see better and farther.*

*Human life and career choices are strictly dependent on one's family background, childhood, and youth. The family home is crucial for one's future growth. This is how your colleague and peer Wacława Chmieleńska remembered your family house in Bogdany: "The manor house was surrounded by huge trees. There was a flowerbed in front of the house and a hedged fruit garden behind. There was a beehive, full of tasty honey. Vegetable*

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The interview was recorded in Warsaw from March to November 2014. Its Polish version was authorized by Professor Kłoczowski in March 2015. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Raymond A. Mentzer from the University of Iowa for a meticulous reading and correcting the English text (PK).

*patches were at the back of the garden. There was also a pond surrounded by bushes near the house.”<sup>1</sup> What are your memories of the family home?*

**JERZY KŁOCZOWSKI (JK):** The memories of my family life bring me back to these happy years of my childhood lived in the region of northern Masovia (Mazowsze). My father owned a small estate there. It comprised a manor house in Bogdany, which had some historical background. This is where I spent my early childhood.

**PK:** *You come from a landowner’s family in Masovia, whose historical roots trace back to the late Middle Ages—as far as it can be inferred from the existing documents. Bogdany is a small village in northern Masovia, which happened to be located close to the Polish border with East Prussia in the interwar period. What were the circumstances of the Kłoczowski family’s residence in Bogdany?*

**JK:** The village of Bogdany was the seat of the House of Rykowski (coat-of-arms: Doliwa or Tres Rosae),<sup>2</sup> into which my grandmother was born. The Kłoczowski family descended from the House of Rawicz—quite widespread in the Middle Ages, mainly over the region of Lesser Poland (Małopolska). The seat of the House was located in Kłoczew<sup>3</sup> (also named Kłoczów), administratively linked with the town of Stężyca. The members of the House had occupied these lands from the early fifteenth century until the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the wake of the Partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, they lost their estate and became civil servants. Yet they never forgot their family roots. My grandfather Józef supervised a variety of estates, settling in Duczumin in the end—an estate located two kilometres from Bogdany, where my grandmother, Kazimiera Rykowska, lived. Kazimiera’s father, Eugeniusz, married Waleria de domo Klicka. He consolidated three large neighboring estates: Bogdany, Krzynowłoga

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1 Waława Chmieleńska, “Jestem rówieśniczką” [I am his peer], in *Historiae peritus: Księga Jubileuszowa Jerzego Kłoczowskiego* [Festschrift for Jerzy Kłoczowski], vol. 2, ed. by Henryk Gapski (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1999), 119.

2 Bogdany Wielkie, a village in the Province of Mazovia, in the district of Przasnysz.

3 Kłoczew, a village in the Lublin Province, in the district of Ryki.

Wielka, and Rycice. When his first wife died, my grandfather Józef married Kazimiera, who was a good friend of his family. In this way, he also acquired my grandmother's estate; and this is how the Kłoczowski family came to be linked with Bogdany.

**PK:** *When in Bogdany, you liked playing outdoors with your friends. Apparently, it was as early as in your childhood when your leadership talents emerged. You designed and organized all kinds of games for the kids in Bogdany. Wacława Chmielińska, who participated in these games, remembered you in the following way: "He would take some treats from the kitchen and give them out to the boys with whom he played—no one forbade him to do so. The village kids were allowed to pick the orchard fruit. There were no class contrasts." She also added that you were a great event organizer: "He designed new games that positively influenced his peers. He was never conceited."<sup>4</sup> Do you recall these moments of your childhood?*

**JK:** I do remember playing with the village kids, with whom I made friends. I remember one experience particularly well, when my friends and I travelled close to the German border. It was 1935 or 1936, after Hitler had become chancellor. We crossed the border, which was possible at that time, and we went towards Grunwald (Grunewald). Popular celebrations were held at that time to commemorate Marshal Hindenburg's tremendous victory over the Russian army at Tannenberg in 1914. Many Germans came there to participate in the celebrations. I remember that when the Germans saw our Polish car, they started threatening us. These threats, addressed to us Poles, moved me deeply. I remember one moment when my friends were gone, and I was alone in the car. Suddenly, a group of Germans came to the car and shook their fists at me. This experience made me realize—as a kind of rude awakening—that a new war against Poland was on its way. I was eleven or twelve then, but I have kept this memory in my mind until today.

When we returned from Germany, we met with some of the village boys and girls and decided to launch an organization named "Defence

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4 Chmielińska, "Jestem rówieśniczką," 120.

5 Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934), president of the Weimar republic (1925–34).



of Birds and Animals—Armed Exercises.” I became chair. I remember one of our teachers who loved nature very much and encouraged us to protect trees. Her deep care of nature went hand in hand with her strong premonition that we all needed to get ready for another war. I asked my father to order some carbines for the boys in our organization. The girls were equipped with some other kind of weapon. We organized parades and other military games and plays. This sense of our independence being endangered—so dear to us, as it had just been regained—was something about which I felt very strongly. I guess this sense of endangerment was shared by our whole generation. All these people were aware of the price of our independence regained after World War I. I daresay that without taking into account this shared sense, one is unable to understand the attitude of the Poles in 1939 and during the whole period of World War II.

One needs to keep in mind that we were the first generation to live in an independent Polish state. We were fully aware that Poland’s regained independence was not so much the result of the Great War than of the victorious war against the Bolsheviks in 1920. There was the general sense of unity and solidarity among the Polish people, regardless of social status or political preferences. This unity passed the test of time in 1939, when the nation faced the growing danger of Nazi German aggression. I do not mean to be hostile towards the Germans, but Poles were determined to defend our independence at all costs. I was brought up in the spirit of love for one’s homeland, but our patriotism was free of hatred towards other nations. We were not nationalists. Our patriotism stemmed from our strong conviction that Poland had a full right to be independent, and that we—the citizens—needed to be ready to defend it when the time came. This is why my generation venerates Józef Piłsudski,<sup>6</sup> who became a symbol of our regained independence in the interwar period. His name is inseparably linked with the Polish path to liberation. The Legions, the Bolshevik war of 1920, and the rebuilding of Poland all relate to him. I learned a lot about Piłsudski from my aunt,

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6 Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), one of the leaders of the Polish Socialist Party, founder and commander of the Polish Legions during World War I, the Chief of State (1918–22), since 1920 Marshal of Poland, commander-in-chief of the Polish Army during the war against the Bolsheviks in 1920; after the May coup of 1926 de facto leader of the Second Polish Republic until his death in 1935.



Ada Daniłowska, who lived in Warsaw and regularly visited us. She talked a lot about him. I became a great fan of Marshal Piłsudski, and I was very deeply moved by his death and funeral in 1935.

**PK:** *Your family kept a living memory of its predecessors, who fought for an independent Poland. They were remembered and constantly recalled by the family. The patriotic tradition anchored in the Polish past was strong and was present in the family narrative.*

**JK:** I owe much to my parents—both my mother and father—in this respect. However, I also owe it to my family traditions and patriotic education. I was born in 1924. In the 1920s and the early 1930s, my family was intensely aware of Polish history. Historic events were remembered, including the older, nineteenth-century uprisings and the relatively recent events of World War I. Paintings by Artur Grottger,<sup>7</sup> which were copied by my grandmother, served as a source in my early historical education. I kept asking about them, and I liked listening to the stories explaining the events depicted. The memory of the January Uprising of 1863 was still vivid. My grandfather had been mayor of the town of Piaseczno (near Warsaw) at that time, and he was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel for supporting the revolt. His health failed, and he died soon afterwards. In addition, his older son, Bolesław, was exiled to Siberia for his active participation in the uprising. I can clearly remember my father saying: “Listen, I am going to tell you what my father—that is, your grandfather—told me.” These stories were recollections of what the uprising was and what the front looked like in our local neighborhood. My father used to say: “Remember that your grandfather was amidst the throngs of people who watched the commander of the uprising Romuald Traugutt<sup>8</sup> being hanged outside the Citadel.” My grandfather was deeply moved by this experience and never forgot it. My grandparents exhibited strong

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7 Artur Grottger (1837–67), a Romantic painter and graphic artist, author of a popular series of black-and-white panels presenting the horrors of the Polish nineteenth century insurrections (*Polonia, Lithuania, Wojna*).

8 Romuald Traugutt (1826–64), general and the last commander of the January Uprising of 1863–64 against the Russian Empire, hanged near the Warsaw Citadel on 5 August 1864.

social and patriotic sensitivities. My grandmother was a clandestine teacher of the village kids. My grandfather was deeply respected by the local community, and he served as a judge in the court of Chorzele for a long time. He took an active part in the troublesome process of land consolidation. There is a short but meaningful inscription on his tomb: "He loved people."

One of the most significant experiences constantly recalled by my father, Eugeniusz—born on 4 August 1897—concerned his singing the church song "Boże, coś Polskę" ("God, Thou Hast Poland")<sup>9</sup> in the parish church of Chorzele in 1905. Any time my father recalled that experience, he cried. Thus, the patriotic tradition was very firmly supported by my parents, who had married in 1924. I can remember from my earliest childhood a portrait of my mother's brother Kazimierz. He was a young officer who died in May 1920 in the battle of Berezina. He was awarded the Cross of Valor. My mother often told me about him. She told me the story of her younger brother who was killed in the 1920 war against the Bolsheviks. He was a young, vigorous boy, and my mother liked recalling him. I remember her showing me a letter that her brother had sent to their mother just before his death, in which he thanked his mother for his patriotic upbringing. Let me make it clear that the kind of patriotic upbringing I refer to was inextricably related to the awareness of what it means to have an independent Poland. The history we witnessed was the real-life experience of concrete people: our predecessors and relatives who took part in all these historic events. My father also served in the military in 1918 and 1920. I still

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9 A patriotic church song appealing to God to save and restore Poland. It is an iconic church song of the period of Partitions and of the communist regime. Lyrics by Alojzy Faliński in 1814, music by Jean-Pierre Solié: "God! Thou surrounded Poland for so many centuries / With the grandeur of might and glory, / And with the shield of Your almighty protection / From ill fortunes that were to oppress her. // (refrain:) Before Your altars we carry our imploration: / Bless our free Fatherland, o Lord! // God! Thou withdrew Poland that was covered for / So many centuries with the grandeur of might and glory, / Suddenly from Your care / And raised these peoples who were supposed to serve her. // (refrain) // Thou, who then were affected by its downfall, / Thou supported her struggle for the holy cause / And as Thou wanted the whole world to testify her courage, / Among ill fortunes Thou only multiplied her glory. // (refrain) // Not long ago you've taken freedom away from Polish territory / And rivers of our tears and blood were shed; / How terrible it must be for those, / Whom Thou take freedom away for centuries. // (refrain) // One of Your words, great Lord of thunders! / Thou'll be able to raise us from the dead, / When we should ever again deserve Your punishment, / Then turn us to ashes, but into free ashes!" // (refrain).

keep in mind my father's story about what happened in Warsaw in November 1918, about the atmosphere of a newly regained independence and about the 1920 anti-Bolshevik war.

My father inherited his mother's grand piano and he used to play it a lot. Apart from the works by Chopin, he also played a vast repertoire of military and patriotic songs, which have been so dear to me since my early childhood. Another significant family ritual occurred after lunch, when my father used to read a book aloud. I remember when my father read to us *Potop* (The Deluge) by Henryk Sienkiewicz,<sup>10</sup> and he used this novel to explain Polish history. He presented the profiles of the novel's protagonists; for example, the little knight Michał Wołodyjowski.<sup>11</sup> This constant presence of Polish history in my family memories and the repeated historical references in the family narrative shaped my interest in the past.

**PK:** *The patriotic family tradition, which you have presented, influenced a whole generation of young people who entered adulthood in the interwar period. To what extent was this historical memory and pride common among the Polish aristocracy and intelligentsia? To what extent was it also shared by the rural population? You mentioned Sienkiewicz's novel and Grottger's woodcuts, which were instrumental in promoting knowledge or rather a kind of imagination relating to Polish history. Do you think that a claim about a socially shared model of patriotic upbringing and education in the interwar period is justified? Was it a model that taught respect for the past and aimed to get the young ready for the active defense of independence?*

**JK:** I am not ready to answer these questions. I was brought up in a rural community; I played with the village kids, and I am unable to use my experience to determine what these patriotic traditions looked like elsewhere. There were many similar traditions with shared common de-

<sup>10</sup> Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), journalist and novelist, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1905); his trilogy—*Ogniem i mieczem* [With fire and sword], published 1884; *Potop* [The deluge], published in 1886; and *Pan Wołodyjowski* [Fire in the steppe], published in 1888—set in seventeenth-century Poland praises patriotism and individual sacrifice in the struggle for independence.

<sup>11</sup> Michał Wołodyjowski, one of the most important characters of Henryk Sienkiewicz's trilogy, a main character in the last novel, *Pan Wołodyjowski*, and symbol of military valor and uncompromised courage.

nominators such as love of one's homeland, happiness in having an independent state, and the *readiness* to defend this independence, which was threatened by the historical turmoil of the late 1930s. Undeniably, the works by Henryk Sienkiewicz and Artur Grottger were critically instrumental in shaping the public historical memory, due to their wide public availability. Sienkiewicz's protagonists like Jan Skrzetuski<sup>12</sup> or Michał Wołodyjowski were convincing for young people like me. These heroes showed us how to love our country and defend it; they definitively influenced our generations. We found their dedication to the Polish cause—so emotionally depicted by Sienkiewicz—particularly relevant in the circumstances of the looming Nazi invasion.

**PK:** *You have told us about the role of your family background, anchored in the memory of the Polish past. It taught you to love your homeland. This historical memory contained real-life events that were part of the Polish struggle for independence. It relied on the real-life experiences of your predecessors, who took an active part in that struggle. All these facts have influenced the way you experience and perceive history—so evidently manifesting itself since the beginning of your life. To what extent has this dramatic history of our nation influenced your interest in history and then your later choice of career?*

**JK:** My family background was vital for my interest in history, but my career choice came much later. Before I could even have a chance to start thinking about my career, World War II broke out. When the Germans invaded Poland, my parents were deprived of their estate, and we suffered deportation. Luckily, my father and mother avoided execution—a tragic fate that struck many families in our region. The area where we lived was incorporated into the Reich, and we were forced to leave for the General Governorate.<sup>13</sup> My parents settled near Warsaw, and I left for Warsaw in 1941, where I stayed until the fall of the Warsaw Uprising in the autumn of 1944. This was an extremely vital period in my life.

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12 Jan Skrzetuski, main character of Sienkiewicz's novel *Ogniem i mieczem*, representing a courageous nobleman and patriot.

13 General Governorate (German: *Generalgouvernement*, Polish: *Generalne Gubernatorstwo*), a Nazi colony established in October 1939 on the territories of central and southern Poland.

**PK:** *Your first educational experiences take us back to your childhood in Bogdany. Apart from the family education, you also attended school there. What was school education like then?*

**JK:** I graduated from the primary school in Bogdany with the help of a local teacher, who was my home tutor. I also commuted to the school in Chorzele. In 1937, I became a student in Adam Mickiewicz Mid-Level Secondary School in Warsaw. When my health deteriorated and I was forced to abandon school, my parents found a French tutor to teach me French. Then, I attended a school run by the Marian Fathers in the Bielany district of Warsaw. The classes were clandestine. I completed my final exam—the so-called “maturity” exam—in 1944, also in the clandestine form. I did it in the previously mentioned Adam Mickiewicz Mid-Level Secondary School in Warsaw. There, I met Stefan Wilkanowicz<sup>14</sup> and Jan Gieysztor,<sup>15</sup> who later became my friends.

**PK:** *You have mentioned the patriotic inspiration that you acquired at home, and how it influenced your life choices. For you and for many of your contemporaries who entered adulthood in the time of World War II, patriotism took a concrete form—involvement in the resistance movement. But for most of you patriotism did not equal nationalism. I would like us to try to define these two concepts. Hence, how did you—and your peers—perceive patriotism and nationalism? Nationalism was an inspiration for Poles before World War I, but did it turn xenophobic in interwar Poland? Did the Polish nationalist movement develop hostility towards other nations or minorities living in the territories of the Second Polish Republic?*

**JK:** We need to keep in mind that nationalism takes different forms and degrees of intensity. Some of them are extreme, others very traditional. Some people tended to put an equal sign between nationalism and patriotism. In interwar Poland, there were representatives of

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<sup>14</sup> Setefan Wilkanowicz (b.1924), Polish journalist and Catholic activist, editor-in-chief of the monthly periodical *Znak* (1978–94).

<sup>15</sup> Jan Gieysztor (1926–2013), soldier of the Union of Armed Struggle and Home Army in the *Baszta* regiment, soldier of the anticommunist underground movement, imprisoned by the communist regime.

the extreme type of nationalism, who were hostile towards other nations or minorities such as Jews, Germans, or Russians. We also need to remember that this sense of hostility had its roots in the negative experiences of the Partitions. This explains why the hostility was mostly declared in relation to Germans or Russians but hardly ever towards Austrians. The underlying idea of this variety of nationalism—often defined in terms of a political religion—is to interpret a nation in terms of the sacred. Other values are necessarily subservient. As we know, this variety of nationalism could transform into totalitarianism. This was the case of Lenin's ideology in Russia or the Nazis' in Germany.

The late nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the phenomenon of social Darwinism—well discussed in the relevant sources. This ideology maintained that the survival of one community is possible when that community succeeds in conquering others. This was believed to hold true for both ethnic and religious communities. This belief led to a series of traumatic experiences in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Each community must unambiguously define its identity, which makes it distinct from other communities. The community must preserve and defend that identity when confronted by others. Ideologies like social Darwinism paved the way for the tragic events in European history. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europe abandoned its medieval heritage—excellently presented by Marc Bloch<sup>16</sup> and Jacques Le Goff. This is a key observation for me. Let me remind you at this point that Europe came into being as a civilization of communities, where the particular societies, states, and other social groups were granted their rights. This principle pertained to cities and villages that won their autonomy. This process was a source of European power. European development was fueled by the development of these communities, anchored in a stable regulatory system. In this sense, the ideology of social Darwinism—put into political practice in the first half of the twentieth century—undermined the foundations of this historical Europe. The legal autonomy of the communities that had survived throughout the ages was constrained by the state. The increase in the

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<sup>16</sup> Marc Bloch (1886–1944), French historian, cofounder of the *Annales* School.

power wielded by the state came at the cost of minor communities. This is why historians like Le Goff so desperately appeal to us that this European tradition—not as distant as it may seem—be remembered. This is also why history matters, even though it is being gradually eradicated from educational programs. Modern globalization processes encourage xenophobia, since many people choose isolationism when facing a vast panorama of hazards. They are ignorant of the historical tradition that laid the foundations for European civilization.

**PK:** *Interwar Polish nationalism became more powerful after Poland regained independence. Was it a consequence of abandoning the multicultural heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for the sake of Poland for Poles?*

**JK:** Yes, it was, but we cannot forget the whole context of the struggle for independence. It is true that National Democracy was a nationalist party, but even within this ideological movement there were many shades and variants. There was a radical organization, the National-Radical Camp (ONR), but there were far more open groups as well. Radical nationalism was a great failure of interwar Poland. The popularity of the movement related closely to the idea of the nation-state, strongly advocated by Roman Dmowski<sup>17</sup>—a man whose dedication to the cause of Poland's independence cannot be overestimated. His variant of nationalism was moderate, but exclusivist. It differed fundamentally from the nationalism supported by Józef Piłsudski and his federalist model of the Polish Republic. Piłsudski strove towards a federation with Belarusians and Ukrainians. Yet, these plans failed, blocked by Lithuanian nationalism and Ukrainian radical nationalism. Many contemporary commentators claim that Piłsudski's federalist attempts were premature. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the tradition of the multinational Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in that state were significant factors that shaped Józef Piłsudski's political concepts.

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<sup>17</sup> Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), Polish politician, and co-founder and chief ideologue of the right-wing National Democracy movement.



**PK:** *Józef Piłsudski is a symbolic person for you, your generation, and for many younger generations of Poles. His active part in regaining and rebuilding the Polish state after World War I is still venerated. There is no denying that he was a key figure in the history of that period: a creator and leader of the Polish Military Organization and the Legions, the head of the Polish state, and the victorious military leader in the 1920 anti-Bolshevik war. Yet, some historians juxtapose Piłsudski against Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk<sup>18</sup>—one of the founding fathers and the first president of Czechoslovakia, who succeeded in creating the only authentic democracy in the whole East Central European region.*

**JK:** This is an extremely puzzling issue, which calls for a lot of thought and research. It also calls for actions to enable a better understanding of the differences between the histories of Poland and the Czech Republic. Let me observe that Polish public opinion concerning the Czechs was hugely influenced by the bitter memory of the Czechoslovak annexation of Zaolzie (trans-Olza Silesia known by the Czechs as Těšínské Slezsko). I remember my lengthy talks with the outstanding Czech philosopher Jan Patočka,<sup>19</sup> when we tried to determine the roots of the negative stereotypes of a Pole and a Czech. We also noted how detrimental these stereotypes were for the mutual relations between both nations. Patočka was a strong adversary and critic of the political line adopted by Edvard Beneš.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, I pointed out the unwise moves of the Polish state, such as the Polish annexation of Zaolzie during the Nazi campaign in the Czech Sudetenland in the autumn of 1938. We need to keep these negative stereotypes in mind, as they caused a lot of harm to both nations. If not for these prejudices and mutual grievances, both states could have been able to form an alliance against the Nazi Reich. The Czechs had a fortified border with the Germans, and their army was quite well armed.

The differences between the subsequent situation in Poland and Czechoslovakia are clearly visible when one compares the structure of

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<sup>18</sup> Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), first president of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Patočka (1907–77), Czech philosopher, first spokesman of Charter 77, the Czech dissident movement during the last two decades of communist rule.

<sup>20</sup> Edvard Beneš (1884–1948), president of Czechoslovakia (1935–38, 1945–48).



the underground resistance movements in both countries under the German occupation—which was also pointed out by Jan Patočka. For example, the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich,<sup>21</sup> which took place in Prague in 1942, was organized and executed by Czech and Slovak soldiers trained in England and deployed in the Czech territories.<sup>22</sup> It was an exceptional operation. In occupied Poland the resistance movement was so strong that executions of Nazi officers were organized and carried out by local underground army units. The Polish underground state organization comprised hundreds of thousands of people.

We agreed that Poles and Czechs need to make a greater effort to get to know and understand one another better, as this kind of understanding between the nations of East Central Europe has not yet been attained. A similar case is that of the troublesome Polish-Ukrainian relations, which are also burdened with a difficult past. We have to remember Piłsudski's flawed Ukrainian politics, for which he eventually apologized. Czech-Slovak relations are another case of mutual misunderstanding. In fact, one could mention many more cases of the detrimental impact of stereotypes on mutual relations between the nations of East Central Europe. This negative impact of stereotypes propelled historians after World War II to debate the history of the region, so as to overcome the stereotypes and prejudices. In my conversations with Czech intellectuals, such as Jan Patočka or František Šmahel, we planned actions that could help undermine these stereotypes.

In the nineteenth century, the relations among Poles in Galicia and Czechs were far from good either. The Czechs were unable to comprehend the idea of the Polish uprisings. Historians explain this in various ways. Some claim that the Czechs were a predominantly agrarian society at that time, and they could not comprehend the Polish revolts in the way the Polish nobility did. Others try to explain why the

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21 Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42), chief of the Reich Main Security Office (including the Gestapo, Kripo, and SD), Deputy/Acting Reich-Protector of Bohemia and Moravia (1941–42).

22 The Operation Anthropoid (the code name for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich) was instigated by František Moravec, head of the Czech intelligence services, decided by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and prepared by the British Special Operations Executive. Support of the underground resistance movement operating in Czechoslovakia was crucial for the success of the operation. A great number of the supporters, as well as the assassins themselves, paid for their engagement with their lives in the aftermath.

Czechs were unwilling to reach for independence, arguing that the Czech aristocracy preferred to compromise with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. These discrepancies in the positions taken by Poles and Czechs were more than evident in the Vienna parliamentary debates. We should add that Czechs always had a positive attitude towards Russians. Furthermore, they were enthusiastic about the idea of Pan-Slavism, so eagerly promoted by the tsarist empire, and quite popular with some Czech intellectuals. Personally, I am not sure how to explain these phenomena. I am sure that a topic worthy of a debate is the stereotypes that grew and had a negative impact on the Czech and Polish politics of the first half of the twentieth century.

**PK:** *I would like to come back to these divergent views on Józef Piłsudski—those in Poland against those outside Poland. Despite all the possible reservations, Piłsudski is a symbolic figure who enjoys huge popularity in contemporary Poland. In the rankings that list the most significant figures in Polish history, Piłsudski is only superseded by John Paul II.<sup>23</sup> In fact, no one can fully comprehend the Polish struggle for independence during World War I and the effort to construct a new Polish state without taking Piłsudski into account. Józef Piłsudski had a well-defined vision of Poland, which emerged after World War I. He was also a man of action, of iron will, and of uncompromising determination. As you have said, as a politician, he was able to reconcile his own Romantic, idealistic thought with highly pragmatic actions. This is why he was able to accept defeat when his plan to build a new federal commonwealth failed. He was also able to modify his strategy to match the circumstances. The fact that Piłsudski is perceived as a dictator who imposed his will on others by means of military force is undeniably the result of the so-called May Coup of 1926. From the Western European or Czech perspective, Józef Piłsudski is seen as one more interwar dictator, on a par with Benito Mussolini, Miklós Horthy, or even Adolf Hitler.*

**JK:** These comparisons have no justification. They result from a failure to comprehend the ideas that inspired Piłsudski and to see the difficult context in which he tried to put these ideas into practice. Piłsudski

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<sup>23</sup> John Paul II (1920–2005), born Karol Wojtyła, pope of the Catholic Church (1978–2005).

deeply appreciated the traditions of the multinational First Polish Republic, and he regarded this tradition as a Polish advantage. This is why, after World War I, he was determined to build a federation with Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians. His plans to rebuild a commonwealth of many nations failed, as it met with strong resistance on the part of Lithuanian and Ukrainian nationalists. The Lithuanian resistance was particularly painful for him. We have to realize that only some decades before, Poles and Lithuanians fought hand in hand in the January Uprising in the name of the commonwealth. Yet the growth of the nationalist movement in late nineteenth-century Lithuania produced the concept of an independent Lithuanian state, built separately from any Polish influence.

Our relations with the Czechs in the interwar period were largely influenced by the sudden Czechoslovak military annexation of Zaolzie, which took place in January 1919, when the Polish army was engaged on the Ukrainian front. Many Poles felt as if they had been betrayed. We also need to keep in mind the growing role of the Czechoslovak communists, who were enthusiastic about the Red Army's raid on Warsaw in 1920. Unlike some of the Czech leaders, Piłsudski had no illusions about Russia—whether tsarist or Bolshevik. He knew firsthand how the Russians treated any pro-independence aspirations of the Poles and how they dealt with political opponents. Finally, let us add here that just after the outbreak of World War II, a scheme emerged to create a Polish-Czechoslovak federation. In 1943, this project failed due to Edvard Beneš's decision to negotiate with Stalin on his own. Today we know the tragic consequences of this move for the Czechs and for Beneš himself. For many Poles, the Czech politics of collaboration with the Germans and the Soviets were difficult to understand. Both Patočka and later Havel understood that mistake. This is why the latter became deeply involved in cooperation with the Polish anticommunist opposition. I wonder if there is anything left of this close cooperation between the Polish and Czech members of the 1980s anticommunist opposition, and if this cooperation was effective in overcoming the historical prejudices and negative stereotypes.

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## Times of Upheaval

**PK:** *The tragic events of World War II affected you, your family, and the whole Polish society. At the age of fifteen, you witnessed the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Soviet attack in September 1939, followed by the five long years of occupation. This was the time when you became an adult. How do you remember this time when independence was lost again and the first years of the occupation?*

**JK:** That was a tragic experience. The Nazi invasion and the simultaneous attack of the Soviet army resulted in a dramatic collapse of the Polish state. The territory of Poland was divided among the invaders. We left Bogdany just before the outbreak of the war. After a month of wandering, we came back home. In late January 1940, the Germans expelled us from our home, taking over our estate. Until the end of 1940, we lived in a place near Bogdany. Staying in Bogdany, we got little information—and rather late—about what was going on in Poland. We knew that a Polish government was established in Paris. We also learned about the growing number of executions in our neighborhood, which made us wonder if the Germans were going to come and murder us, too. The scale of Nazi homicide was smaller in our region in contrast with those territories that the Germans regarded as their own, and which belonged to the Reich before 1918. Our region was part of the former Russian Partition, and that is why the Nazi cruelties were different there. Those Germans who expelled us from the house in Bogdany were gentle enough to allow us to take some of our belongings and commodities.

**PK:** *When the Germans forced your family to settle near Warsaw in late 1940, you were sixteen and you continued your education in Adam Mickiewicz Mid-Level Secondary School in the Warsaw district of Bielany. This is how you met other people who suffered because of the war and sought refuge in Warsaw. You also got involved in the underground resistance movement at this time.*

**JK:** My parents settled near Warsaw at the very end of 1940, and they sent me to the boarding school run by the Marian Fathers in Warsaw. I passed my mid-level final exam there. I lived in many Warsaw loca-

tions, e.g., in the dormitory at the corner of Marszałkowska and Mo-niuszki streets. There were a hundred young people from all over Poland in Warsaw, which seemed to be a safe harbor for Poles from east and west. This was indeed an exceptional experience: to meet so many young people who were forced to seek refuge in Warsaw as a result of the war. Boys lived on the second floor of the dormitory, while girls—also from all over Poland—were on the fourth. The youth were under the custody of the Central Welfare Council. We talked and shared our life stories, which was an extraordinary experience. Listening to stories from all over Poland showed the wartime drama of so many Polish families. This is how we learned about the events that took place in the East, informed by those who had escaped the Soviet invasion. My engagement in the underground resistance movement began in 1941.

**PK:** *Your biography and memoirs show that secondary school education automatically meant becoming part of the resistance movement.*

**JK:** Yes, the resistance movement was simultaneous to school education. I joined the movement with the whole group of my Bielany school peers. The years 1941–44 were a time when, on the one hand, I was active—very active, indeed—in the resistance; on the other, I took part in clandestine classes preparing me for the mid-level final exam. The classes were conducted in groups of five or six, which corresponded directly to the size of the basic organizational unit of the resistance movement, which was called a section. I joined the resistance movement inspired by my teacher, who incorporated our whole class group into a Home Army unit, later named *Baszta* (Turret). This name was taken from a staff battalion, incorporating two companies, situated in the district of Żoliborz. This was a youth, scouting initiative, which was taken over by the military and incorporated within the structure of the Polish underground army, the Armed Resistance, later renamed the Home Army (AK).<sup>24</sup> The Chief Command Office of the Home Army created a unit that later developed into a battalion with the same

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<sup>24</sup> The Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), established in February 1942 by the Polish Government-in-Exile as the dominant resistance movement on the territories of Poland occupied by Nazi Germany, disbanded in January 1945.

## Times of Upheaval

name. Three years later, the battalion grew into a regiment, also named *Baszta*. The commanders of *Baszta* concentrated on educating the youth to become military staff subject to regular military training. Our meetings were usually held once a week in various locations all over Warsaw. From time to time, we also met outside Warsaw. This is how I got well acquainted with the forests surrounding Warsaw. The units within our company met at night in the forest near Otwock. We had a very brave commander, whom we liked and admired. Thanks to these forest camps, I was able to find out how many students living in my dormitory were members of the resistance movement. Some of these friendships have survived until today.

**PK:** *By taking a military vow and entering the underground state army, you became a regular soldier fighting against the German occupation. What did your military training look like?*

**JK:** It started with shooting practice. Then I participated in the non-commissioned officer training, which I completed in 1942. The training was conducted by various trainers. In 1943, I completed the officer cadet training. I remember well that the final exam for the cadet officer was far more demanding than my final secondary school exam. The exam procedure was conducted by a colonel from the Main Command Office of the Home Army, and it took almost a full day to complete. I remember the pressure: the military exercises alone took something like six hours. I did well on the exam. I was happy to score the highest in my group. This was my big success. We were involved in military activities, but first and foremost, our task was to train military staff. In 1943, when I became an officer cadet, I was nominated deputy commanding officer of a platoon. My commander and I were in charge of four squads, that is eight sections. It took me a lot of time to inspect these troops and train my platoon. I remember studying for the secondary school final exam and, simultaneously, training new volunteers. In 1944, when a course for junior commanders was organized, I became an assistant to the officer in charge. During that course, we went to the Wyszaków forest, where we met a group of boys from the Jewish Combat Organization. This was a most interesting meeting, as

they told us about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.<sup>25</sup> They had taken refuge in the forest, protected by the Home Army, and were awaiting a new chance to fight against the Germans. They said they dreamed of continuing combat. They asked us to remember them when the Warsaw Uprising started and to let them fight.

**PK:** *We are talking now about the phenomenon of the Polish underground state, which was exceptional in the history of the anti-German resistance in all the occupied territories. You were among those who initiated it and you were part of it as a Home Army soldier. Did you realize the organizational potential of that underground state at that time?*

**JK:** Yes, I did. The Home Army was an integral part of this state, and we felt that we were its citizens. To emphasize this civil approach to statehood, the only form of address accepted in the resistance movement was *Obywatel* (citizen). Therefore, you always addressed your superiors as “Citizen Commander.” No other forms were used. This was a manifestation of an old tradition developed by the Legions and the Polish Military Organization, to which we adhered closely. This tradition expressed our conviction that we served our country and state. We felt that we were citizens and the soldiers of the Home Army – a volunteer army that continued the combat after the collapse of the Polish state in September 1939. We felt we were an army of the state that functioned despite the German occupation. The state had its government in London, but it was also represented in the occupied lands by its agents and armed forces. This sense of a continuation of Polish statehood was emphasized in our underground resistance education. We also had various conceptions of a democratic state to be built after

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<sup>25</sup> The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started on 19 April 1943 and lasted until 16 May. It was provoked by the Nazi suppression of the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw and the extermination of Jews in the General Governorate. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was conducted by hundreds of soldiers from the Jewish Combat Organization (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*) and the Jewish Military Association (*Żydowski Związek Wojskowy*). It was the first mass-scale military operation against the Germans in the General Governorate, and the first major urban combat in the Nazi-occupied territory of Europe. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising should not be confused with the Warsaw Uprising (1 August–2 October 1944), conducted by the Home Army to liberate Warsaw from German occupation.



liberation—a state where political interests and views would be in the far background of public attention. Our dormitory hosted young people from the rural areas and cities—people of different worldviews and political options. Yet we all felt we were thinking together about a new Polish state. A lot of these young people served in various units of *Baszta*.

**PK:** *Your resistance movement pseudonym was Piotruś (Pete). How did that happen?*

**JK:** I chose this pseudonym myself, and it was inspired by my interest in my family history. Once, when at Bielany School, I was browsing through old books. Among them, there was one about King Stephen Bathory's war against the Russians. This is where I found a mention of Piotr Kłoczowski, who died in the siege of Velikiye Luki in 1582. I found this story about my distant ancestor intriguing. I thought of him as a great hero who lost his life serving his country. When I was entering the resistance, I needed to pick a pseudonym. I said I wanted "Piotr" (Peter) to venerate the hero of Velikiye Luki. However, when it turned out that someone else had already taken that name, I was offered the name Piotruś, and so this became my pseudonym. I chose it thinking that if he died for the homeland and became a hero, I could also sacrifice my life for Poland. Later on, I told my family the story of Piotr Kłoczowski, and my father confirmed that he knew this old story. It seems everyone had forgotten it, so I was proud to have recalled it.

**PK:** *This story reveals traces of your family traditions, but it also exhibits your early interest in historical research. It seems justified to say that your enthusiasm about the past began with that experience, when one of your early library searches helped you rediscover a forebear, whom you found exemplary and worth following. Apparently, this family-rooted patriotism and the pride taken in the distant predecessor influenced your life choices. Under the pseudonym of Piotruś, you made your name in the ranks of Baszta, and this wartime pseudonym lasted for much longer after World War II.*



**JK:** Yes, I became Piotruś for much longer than the occupation. For my resistance friends, I became Piotruś for good. This is how they usually addressed me. A lot of people called me that even after the war. Quite recently, I had a phone call from a friend of mine. She was a liaison during the Warsaw Uprising, and she still calls me Piotruś.

**PK:** *To be a member of the resistance movement was a brave act. The type of punishment for active resistance against the German occupiers could not be more obvious. Everyone knew the fate awaiting those whose conspiracy was uncovered. Were you aware of this enormous risk you were taking? A risk of losing your life, which was highly probable in the case of resistance activities.*

**JK:** I need to mention the miraculous salvation that I experienced just before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. One day, the superiors in our dormitory asked us to leave, since our resistance activities severely endangered all the other students. Accompanied by three other colleagues, I left the dormitory and rented a private flat in a house at the corner of Marszałkowska and Śniadeccy streets. On Sunday, 24 May 1943, I left the flat very early in the morning and went to Zielonka<sup>26</sup> near Warsaw to visit my parents. That very night four criminals plundered our flat and killed my three colleagues: Wojciech Broszkiewicz, Tadeusz Turski, and Kazimierz Król. This criminal mystery remained forever unsolved. No one knows who was responsible for that crime. The Germans did occasionally run such actions against the Polish resistance movement, yet in this case all the attempts to determine the responsibility for the killing failed. An investigation was held, but in vain. This is why I find myself miraculously saved. When I came back to Warsaw on Monday, I met a friend who told me about this tragic event. He warned me to be watchful, as I still could be a target for the killers. This is why I took a secret shelter for some time. I will not mention other experiences, but, in a nutshell, resistance activities were hardly a piece of cake.

**PK:** *Your memory of being an active member of the resistance movement is still vivid. For a young man who was at the beginning of his adult life, your*

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<sup>26</sup> Zielonka, a town in the province of Mazovia, district of Wolomin, 15 km east from Warsaw.

*resistance engagement must have been an exceptional experience that shaped your personality, taught you teamwork, and fostered mutual trust and help. You were not even twenty when you took part in the Warsaw Uprising, which was one of the most dramatic events in the history of our nation. The uprising still remains an important subject and a point of reference in debates on contemporary Polish attitudes towards the past. It is still easy to discern the strongly opposed views on the uprising. There are those who advocate the decision to fight, while others claim that the decision to suffer such enormous losses in the confrontation with the enemy, whose power was disproportionately larger, was a mistake. You joined the uprising from its early days, and you had no doubt that the uprising was a must.*

**JK:** My unit was trained for combat and we were well prepared. People were impatient; they were eager to fight. They wanted the uprising to start without further delay. Our biggest problem at that time was containing their zeal. Our strong, friendly relationships as members of the resistance helped a lot in this respect.

When the Warsaw Uprising finally broke out on 1 August, 1944, my regiment *Baszta* engaged the enemy in the Mokotów district. My regiment was one of the elite units that were awarded the highest Polish military distinction: the War Order of Virtuti Militari. One can say that *Baszta* paved the way for the success of the uprising in the district of Mokotów. *Baszta* accepted the whole pressure of the enemy power when the other units were defeated. To a large extent, this success was possible thanks to our commanders—of both the regiment and the battalion. They were experienced and wise. They knew how to fight without sustaining heavy losses. Our regiment comprised three battalions: *Bałtyk* (The Baltic), *Olza* (The Olza River), and *Karpaty* (The Carpathian Mountains). The cryptonym “B1” designated the first company of the battalion *Bałtyk*, where I was a soldier. In the first days of the uprising, our battalion surrounded a big school building, where about four hundred SS-men had taken refuge. They had enormous firepower that rendered a direct assault unreasonable. And this is where the wisdom of our commanders showed. They forbade us to attack the building directly, which some other units did. We surrounded the Germans and kept them under siege until dark. We were sup-

ported in this operation by other units. Then we were ordered to retreat. About thirty of our boys lost their lives there. Thanks to the siege, we were able to take over the whole district of Mokotów.

I was fighting in Mokotów for two entire months, until the fall of the uprising in the district. I was member of company “Br” and then was nominated to be a platoon commander. This is where I stayed till the end of the uprising. I was in very good relations with all my soldiers. Our voluntary army was permeated by a great atmosphere, which is often reported by those who survived the struggle. I was wounded during the very last days of the Mokotów campaign. We found ourselves under attack from the regular Wehrmacht forces. The attack took place when the Soviet army suppressed its offensive against the German 8th Army, which protected the middle section of the Vistula River. Thus, the Germans were able to send their regular frontline units against us, including the SS Division “Hermann Göring.” These forces were so huge that we found them unstoppable. Thus, keeping Mokotów was no longer possible. My platoon was a reserve unit. On the night of 25 and 26 September, I led my platoon into a counterattack, trying to take over the building of the so-called Królikarnia—a Neoclassical palace. I was hit by a round from a machine gun. I got immediate medical help. Doctors had to amputate my right arm. I must admit that the uprising’s medical personnel were extremely dedicated. When lying badly wounded in a company sick bay, I was thinking my colleagues were going to take me to the district of Śródmieście via the underground sewer pipeline. But that turned out to be impossible.

A couple of days later, the uprising was over. We were absolutely certain that we would all be executed after the capitulation. Yet it turned out that our units were the first to be treated by the Germans as prisoners of war. This was because the Allies had declared that they considered the Home Army to be an allied force. So, lying wounded, with no possibility to move, I was ready to die. Qualified as heavily wounded, I was transported to a hospital in a POW camp in Skierniewice.<sup>27</sup> We experienced enormous help and kind-heartedness from the people of Skierniewice. The Germans did not prevent them from help-

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27 Skierniewice, a town in the province of Łódź, 70 km southwest from Warsaw.

ing us, confining themselves only to guarding us. The citizens of Skiernewice bribed the German guards and helped us as much as they could. This was an incredible experience of human goodness.

**PK:** *As a gesture of recognition of your merit for the Warsaw Uprising, you were awarded the highest Polish military distinction: The Silver Cross of the War Order of Virtuti Militari.*<sup>28</sup>

**JK:** The Order of Virtuti Militari is the distinction I find dearest. The application was put forward by the commander of my company in recognition of my role in the military operation on 14 August 1944. Formally, my award was a result of the order issued by the commander-in-chief of the Home Army, General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski.<sup>29</sup> The relevant identity document, issued by the Polish Ministry of National Defence in London, is dated 21 March 1962. I was also awarded the Cross of Valor<sup>30</sup> and the Silver Cross of Merit with Swords.<sup>31</sup>

**PK:** *Your platoon subordinates remember you as a brave and committed man, who could be trusted and who enjoyed high esteem and authority. Your soldiers liked you and respected you. They were ready to go through fire for you. Let me quote here from a memoir of Bolesław Taborski, who was a soldier in your platoon: “The authority that the deputy commander of our platoon enjoyed came out of love and I daresay admiration of the soldiers. It was in stark contrast to the way the soldiers treated the official commander—a pre-war officer, who failed to comprehend the specificity of ‘our war.’ Piotruś did not have to make people do something or force them into anything. We gladly did everything he wanted. He did not ‘play the commander’ and he had a friend-*

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28 The War Order of Virtuti Militari (*Order Wojenny Virtuti Militari*): the highest Polish military decoration for heroism and courage in the face of the enemy, created by King Stanisław August Poniatowski in 1792.

29 Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski (1895–1966), an officer of the Polish Army, after July 1941 deputy commander and after March 1943 commander-in-chief of the Home Army, commander of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile.

30 The Cross of Valor (*Krzyż Walecznych*): a Polish military decoration established by the Council of National Defense on 11 August 1920, awarded for deeds of valor and courage on the battlefield.

31 The Cross of Merit with Swords (*Krzyż zasługi z mieczami*): a Polish military award established on 19 October 1942 by the Polish government-in-exile and awarded for deeds of bravery and valor during times of war.

*ly relationship with his soldiers, which came easy to him.” The latter part of this memoir contains details that refer to you and that were written on 28 August 1944, in the fourth week of the uprising. Taborski wrote, “The most pleasant moments of today were that with ‘Piotruś’ and the grand piano. He is a great pianist. He plays classical music to us. And the military songs were good for our spirit, and we could sing with him in these rare moments of oblivion. Now, this is our commander, who was with us in the old days of the resistance movement. He thinks of all of us now as a military commander should, and we are ready to go into fire for him—which in fact we often do.”<sup>32</sup> I think it might be embarrassing for you to comment on such evaluative statements uttered by your subordinate and friend, with whom you fought hand in hand for the liberation of Poland seventy years ago.*

**JK:** I remember that. When I was named a platoon deputy commander, my colleagues started to toss me up in joy. Yes, indeed, I had a great, friendly relationship with my soldiers. I could always count on my colleagues.

**PK:** *We have been talking a lot about your World War II resistance movement experiences. To what extent did they turn out to be instrumental in your later life? Did it help you in creating research groups and holding important positions at the university and at other research institutions?*

**JK:** This experience did influence my later life. We were very young, but we had a great sense of responsibility for what we were doing and saying. This was a great school of life for us all. In our circumstances, you really needed to watch what you were saying. We all vowed to be loyal to the resistance movement. Hence, we all knew how mindful we had to be when talking to anyone and how accountable we had to be when doing anything. Any mistake of that kind could be very costly for a resistance member, even if it only meant being unmasked. Your membership was to remain a complete secret, with only some absolutely necessary exceptions. I remember telling my father about it, as I was fully confident he

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<sup>32</sup> Bolesław Taborski, “Dowódca i Przyjaciół” [A commander and a friend], in Gapski, ed., *Historiae peritus*, 147.

was not going to give this secret away to anyone. We had a strong sense of solidarity and mutual trust. We were sure that we could depend entirely on each other. Each of us could be sure that even in the worst of situations, the colleagues were bound to come to the rescue. This was a source of self-confidence in all our actions. Our resistance activities were a school of social life that taught solidarity and accountability. We were fully aware of our being a voluntary army that was fighting for the future of our country. The resistance movement was also a school of democracy, where your social background did not matter. It was irrelevant if you were a son of a teacher or of a worker. We were colleagues who could always depend on each other. I remember our trip to a village that supported the activities of the Home Army. We met the village youth there, and we talked with them freely, with no limits. We enjoyed talking with each other so much that the village boys decided to ask us for help in solving a problem they had. They complained about the local village mayor, who collaborated with the Germans. We organized a night patrol and went to his house. We roughed him up and warned him against any further collaboration with the Germans. We threatened to return if we learned that he continued to collaborate. He promised to stop.

**PK:** *The collapse of the uprising was a tragedy for a lot of Poles, for the commanders of the Home Army, and for many other people involved in the resistance movement, who eagerly awaited the end of the German occupation. This experience was particularly painful for you. You lost your arm, and you struggled to come to terms with the new, postwar reality. This reality was bitterly different from what you had been fighting for and what you dreamed about. In a new, territorially reduced Polish state, the power was taken over by the communists, supported by Stalin and the Red Army. A new political system was brutally imposed. It refused to accept the legitimacy of the Polish government-in-exile and approached the Home Army soldiers with hostility.*

**JK:** Yes, this was a painful experience. Even during the uprising, we felt that the Russians left us on our own. We saw them on the other bank of the Vistula, and they did nothing to help us. When I was in the POW camp, I met some wounded soldiers from the Polish army com-

manded by General Zygmunt Berling<sup>33</sup> and some Russians. We had very interesting conversations, especially with the Berling soldiers. We spoke openly about what was likely to happen to us when the Soviets came in. They told us a lot about their own experiences. In cooperation with my resistance friends—Adam Stanowski<sup>34</sup> and Krzysztof Kasznica,<sup>35</sup> who later became a Dominican friar—we organized a university of sorts for them and educated them, for their schooling was poor. We held lectures and historical debates for them, and they enjoyed these activities a lot. This was my early experience in teaching history. They, in turn, told us about their experiences on the eastern front. They represented those voluntary units that were allowed to cross the Vistula but without any fire cover. They were under no illusion as to the Soviets' political plans concerning Poland. It turned out that our opinions on that issue were exactly the same.

**PK:** *How did you manage to escape from the POW camp in Skierniewice, and what were the first weeks of your freedom like? Was this freedom a rude awakening for you?*

**JK:** When the Germans left Skierniewice, I was stopped by a Soviet patrol and arrested as a Home Army soldier. I freed myself with the help of one of the Berling soldiers whom I had previously met in the camp. My parents learned where I was hiding, and they came to Skierniewice to see me. Together, we went on foot to Brwinów, where they had been living after the Germans expelled them from Zielonka.

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**PK:** *In the spring of 1945, the war in Europe was coming to an end. Poland witnessed the growth of a new political regime that openly combated the*

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33 Zygmunt Berling (1896–1980), general and commander of the Polish army in the USSR, a communist politician and activist of the Polish United Workers' Party.

34 Adam Stanowski (1927–1990), soldier of Home Army, Catholic activist and journalist; lecturer at the Catholic University of Lublin and editor-in-chief of the Catholic monthly periodical *Więź*.

35 Krzysztof Kasznica (1923–93), a Dominican, son of Stanisław Kasznica, professor of law at the University of Poznań, a soldier of the Home Army and participant of the Warsaw Uprising.



*military units of the underground Polish state. As a Home Army soldier, wounded in the Warsaw Uprising, you needed to decide upon your future. You chose to study history at the reactivated Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Why did you choose Poznań? Taking into account the complex postwar reality, what were these first years at the university like?*

**JK:** My decision to begin historical academic studies was a quick one. When I was wondering what to do with myself, having only one hand, I thought I could study history. What else could I possibly do at that time? While I was in the POW camp, my friend Krzysztof Kasznica used to say that Warsaw had been so severely destroyed that no university would be able to start there in the near future. He suggested going to Poznań, since—as far as we knew—it was not seriously affected by the war. We hoped for a prompt restart of the university there. Kasznica's father had been a longtime rector at Poznań University before World War II, and so he could help me in becoming a student. I had no documents on me, so I badly needed that kind of help. Kasznica left me his Poznań address.

Soon after the liberation, I decided to leave for Poznań. The trains were few and far between, but I somehow managed to get to Poznań just after Easter and finally found my way to Kasznica's flat. His family welcomed me warmly. The next day, Rector Kasznica took me to the university and helped me with the formalities so that I could enrol for studies. He went to the dean's office with me and said: "This young man completed his secondary school final exam but has no documents to confirm that." This was how I became student of history in Poznań. My choice of studies turned out to be a lucky one. There were only few students. After all, when I began to study, the war still was not over. This small group of students had their classes with the outstanding medieval historian Kazimierz Tymieniecki. He introduced us to the historian's craft. Adam Skałkowski, an expert in modern history, was a prominent figure, too. Another scholar was Gerard Labuda,<sup>36</sup> a young researcher at that time, who visited Ger-

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36 Gerard Labuda (1916–2010), Polish historian, president of the Polish Academy of Learning (1989–94).



man libraries and collected their books. Tymieniecki lectured in medieval history. These lectures inspired me to write my master thesis in his seminar. Later on, Karol Górski came to Poznań, too. I began to work under his supervision on the Dominican Order. When Górski moved to Toruń, I attended his seminars there, and I wrote my Ph.D. under his supervision. It did not take me long, as I completed the project in 1950.

**PK:** *Kazimierz Tymieniecki and Karol Górski were two significant Polish scholars of the Middle Ages, despite all the differences between them. They were authors of pioneering works in different areas of medieval historical studies. Tymieniecki mostly focused on the social and economic history of Poland under the Piast Dynasty, whereas Górski devoted a lot of his works to the history of the Teutonic Order and its relationship with Poland, and to medieval religious culture. How did these two specialists influence your growth as a historian and your choice of research domain?*

**JK:** I am extremely indebted to Kazimierz Tymieniecki, especially regarding the skills for understanding history. He introduced me to the study of history and historiography. His lectures on the history of Europe were marvelous, because of the very wide scope he took in his analysis. He was an outstanding historian who taught me how to understand historical sources and how to keep a wide outlook on historical events. He taught me the most significant trends in the historiographic research of the time. Thanks to him, I became familiar with the works of Henri Pirenne.<sup>37</sup> Later, I had classes with Adam Skałkowski, who taught eighteenth-century history, and who focused predominantly on King Stanisław Augustus Poniatowski<sup>38</sup> and Tadeusz Kościuszko.<sup>39</sup> There were also other wonderful teachers.

At that time, I had a good relationship with the Poznań-based Dominican Fathers. This is why, when Karol Górski began teaching us,

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<sup>37</sup> Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), Belgian medievalist.

<sup>38</sup> Stanisław Augustus Poniatowski (1732–96), the last king of Poland, elected in 1764 deposed in 1795 in the aftermath of the Third Partition of Poland.

<sup>39</sup> Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1813), a Polish general, Commander of the Insurrection of 1794, leader of the Polish emigration in Western Europe.

I became interested in the history of Christianity, which he himself regarded as a hugely ignored research topic. Professor Górski mostly dealt with the Teutonic Order and fifteenth-century history. He also held a kind of informal research seminar, where he discussed the problems of medieval spirituality. His lectures were far more advanced than those by Tymieniecki, and they introduced a wider, pan-European outlook. When I mentioned my interest in the Dominicans, Górski observed that this was a worthwhile topic but one that had a lot of issues still awaiting explanation and elaboration. Therefore, my master thesis and my doctoral dissertation were devoted to the medieval history of the Order of Preachers in Poland.<sup>40</sup>

**PK:** *Apparently, you found your academic masters at the very beginning of your research path. Kazimierz Tymieniecki taught you the basics of the historian's craft and explained the methodological aspects to you, equipping you for your future independent research career. Karol Górski, on the other hand, helped you determine your research domain and introduced you to the research on medieval Christianity.*

**JK:** Thanks to my connection with the Dominicans, I was attracted to the paradigm adopted by a significant school of historical research, including such outstanding Church historians as Yves Congar<sup>41</sup> and Marie-Dominique Chenu.<sup>42</sup> This school promoted a new way of understanding Christianity. One needs to remember that this school was responsible for a lot of solutions adopted by the Second Vatican Council. In addition, Pierre Mandonnet<sup>43</sup> was very closely related to the *Annales* school. One of the first things for me to do when I came to Lublin in 1950 was to read a massive study by Marc Bloch entitled *La Société féodale*.<sup>44</sup> I read it in French, as no Polish translation of that important work was available at the time. This work allowed me to take a

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<sup>40</sup> Published later as, Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Dominikanie polscy na Śląsku w XIII–XIV wieku* [Polish Dominicans in Silesia, 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century] (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1956).

<sup>41</sup> Yves Congar (1904–95), French Dominican theologian.

<sup>42</sup> Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990), French Dominican theologian.

<sup>43</sup> Pierre Mandonnet (1858–1936), French-Belgian Dominican historian.

<sup>44</sup> Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale*, 2 vols. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1939–40).

fresh look at the Middle Ages. It became a crucial source of inspiration for my own research. During my classes at the Catholic University of Lublin, I talked a lot about Bloch and his approach to medieval history. KUL must have been the only academic center of the time of the Stalinist regime where Bloch's views were taught. Through the Dominicans and Bloch, I got close to the French school of social and religious history. This allowed me to design my future research program concerning Polish Christianity. Its major objective was to depict the Christian community in time and space, presented as a long-term, continuous historical evolution.

**PK:** *Your contacts with the Warsaw historians' milieu turned out to be crucial for your research and organization plans. In the 1950s, you began to cooperate with the leading researchers of the Middle Ages in Warsaw, including Tadeusz Manteuffel,<sup>45</sup> director of the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences; Stanisław Herbst;<sup>46</sup> Aleksander Gieysztor;<sup>47</sup> and Stefan Kieniewicz.<sup>48</sup> All these historians had a lot in common. They shared the common experience of World War II and their activity in the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Central Command of the Home Army. In his memoirs, Karol Modzelewski observed: "In 1945, they changed their uprising arm bands into professorial vests to face the effort of reconstructing and preserving at a tolerable level the structures of Polish academia, despite the communist rule." The leader of that milieu, Professor Tadeusz Manteuffel, is believed to have said once to Aleksander Gieysztor: "We will no longer build a partisan army but a university."<sup>49</sup>*

**JK:** After the political thaw of 1956, I made contact with the Warsaw circle of historians, whose prominence in the field of Polish historiog-

45 Tadeusz Manteuffel (1902–70), Polish medievalist.

46 Stanisław Herbst (1907–73), Polish historian.

47 Aleksander Gieysztor (1916–99), Polish medievalist, soldier of Home Army and participant of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, in 1990–92 president of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

48 Stefan Kieniewicz (1907–92), Polish historian, editor-in-chief of historical periodical *Przegląd Historyczny*.

49 Karol Modzelewski, *Zajeżdżamy kobylę historii: Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźcy* [We are going to flog the horse of history to death: Confessions of a beaten-up rider] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 2013), 82.

raphy was growing. This was when the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences was launched. The Warsaw historians helped my associates and me in a number of ways. We particularly appreciated their help with our doctoral dissertations, which could not be defended at KUL at that time.<sup>50</sup> The professors you have mentioned were extremely helpful. Our doctoral students attended their seminars in Warsaw, and the High Council of the Historical Faculty of the University of Warsaw conducted the doctoral and habilitation procedures of our researchers and students for a long time. Apart from this resistance-related generation of Warsaw historians, I also developed a close relation with a group of younger researchers, including Henryk Samsonowicz<sup>51</sup> and Bronisław Geremek.<sup>52</sup> Contacts like these were crucial at that time.

**PK:** *The Warsaw milieu of historians helped you get in touch with representatives of the French Annales school. This is how you met Gabriel Le Bras and Jacques Le Goff.*

**JK:** I first met Gabriel Le Bras in Warsaw in 1958. He was an outstanding specialist in the history of the Church. He was invited to Poland by Professor Jakub Sawicki.<sup>53</sup> He had met Le Bras in Strasbourg, and they developed a close friendship. Le Bras also was a founding father of *Annales*. He was appreciated by all those inspired by the *Annales*' research program. He was respected by Jacques Le Goff. Our first conversation proved that we shared a lot of interests as historians. Thus, I decided to invite him to Lublin. Le Bras planned to visit Cracow. When Rev. Professor Marian Rechowicz,<sup>54</sup> rector of KUL, accepted my proposal, I went by car to Cracow and brought Le Bras to

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<sup>50</sup> KUL was a private institution of the Catholic Church outside the direct supervision of communist authorities and as such was not granted full university rights, including promotion to doctoral degrees.

<sup>51</sup> Henryk Samsonowicz (b.1930), Polish historian, minister of national education (1989–91).

<sup>52</sup> Bronisław Geremek (1932–2008), Polish historian and politician, one of the leaders of the “Solidarity” movement, minister of foreign affairs (1997–2000).

<sup>53</sup> Jakub Sawicki (1899–1979) Polish historian, editor of the medieval statutes of the Polish Catholic Church (*Concilia Poloniae*).

<sup>54</sup> Marian Rechowicz (1910–83), Catholic priest and theologian, apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Lviv (1974–83).

Lublin. Bishop Piotr Kałwa<sup>55</sup> was very happy to have Le Bras in Lublin, as he appreciated his publications very much. I had an opportunity to talk to Le Bras many times. This acquaintance was very helpful in the future.

**PK:** *Your historical works reveal influences of another French historian, Alphonse Dupront,<sup>56</sup> who was a well-known researcher of the idea of medieval crusades and one of the pioneers of historical anthropology.*

**JK:** Alphonse Dupront is rather unknown in Poland, especially in comparison with other French historians. He was once invited to Poland by Aleksander Gieysztor, who also took him to Lublin. Dupront had a keen interest in widely understood religious phenomena. Having spent some time in Poland, he was fascinated by the vast range of forms of religious life he could observe. Aleksander Gieysztor told us about Dupront running around cemeteries and churches, looking at our religious practices with awe. He asked us to tell him about those practices that he personally knew only from historical sources but that were still alive in Poland. Dupront designed a vast research program in historical anthropology concerning the history of Christianity in Europe. In the field of medieval history, he earned recognition mostly as a scholar of the crusades. He tried to present them from a different perspective than the one adopted by historians before him. In fact, the scope of his research projects was far wider. His critical studies of the Enlightenment hugely influenced the work of François Furet<sup>57</sup> on the French Revolution.<sup>58</sup> Undeniably, Dupront was one of the leading French historians of his time, even though he never won recognition comparable to that of Fernand Braudel.<sup>59</sup> To some extent, this was because of the complicated language Dupront used in his works.

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55 Piotr Kałwa (1893–1974), Catholic priest and theologian, bishop of Lublin (1949–74).

56 Alphonse Dupront (1905–90), French historian and anthropologist.

57 François Furet (1927–97), French historian.

58 François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 1965); François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard 1972); *La Révolution: 1779–1880*, (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 1988).

59 Fernand Braudel (1902–85), French historian and a leader of the *Annales* school.

**PK:** *Your contacts with the French historians were an important milestone for your intellectual growth, for your research craft, and for your projects on the history of Christianity in Poland. You had occasion to meet Gabriel Le Bras and Jacques Le Goff when they visited Poland. In the late 1950s, you also began to regularly visit Western European countries like France, Belgium, and Italy. How did you manage to get your passport and a permit for such visits? Those were days when the borders of communist Poland were tightly closed for the average Polish citizen.*

**JK:** It is common knowledge that leaving Poland was difficult at the time. I first left for France in 1959, even though I had been trying to get my passport long before. Until 1959, the Office of Public Security had rejected all my applications for a visit abroad. I finally managed to get the passport thanks to an acquaintance. He was a boy of Jewish descent who had fought in my platoon. His pseudonym was “Mareczek” (little Mark).<sup>60</sup> He always openly declared his sympathy for communism. When the uprising collapsed, he was deported to a POW camp, and no one betrayed him to the Germans. Then he pursued a great career in the Communist Party, and in the 1950s, he was a director in the Supreme Chamber of Control (NIK). Whenever he visited Lublin, he would pay me a visit. He repeatedly said that staying in touch with the colleagues from the Home Army was the most important thing for him. He assured me that in case of any trouble he would come to my aid. When I told him that I had problems with getting my passport, he promised to help. He had a friend, an officer in the Security Office, with whom he used to hunt a lot and who could help with my passport. When he asked if he should talk to his friend for me, I made it clear that I would not agree to cooperate with the office in any way. Later, he phoned me and said I was to report to the Warsaw Security Office. When I went there, they served me coffee and offered their help in sending me abroad. Therefore, my uprising contacts turned out to be useful in getting the permit to go abroad.

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60 “Mareczek” [Little Marek]: Zygmunt (Jerzy) Cygielstrejch (b. 1918), soldier of the Home Army in the *Baszta* regiment; after World War II director in the Supreme Chamber of Control, lecturer in the Central School of Planning and Statistics; after 1968 he emigrated to Israel.

**PK:** *In the autumn of 2004, the journalist Stanisław Michalkiewicz<sup>61</sup> made a public accusation against you in the Głos Katolicki (The Catholic Voice),<sup>62</sup> and then in Najwyższy Czas (High Time).<sup>63</sup> He accused you of a long-term collaboration with the communist security apparatus. This attack exemplifies the public debate on the so-called vetting that took place in Poland some ten years ago. Numerous representatives of various circles spoke in your defence. What do you think about these events now, ten years later?*

**JK:** That was a widely publicized and painful experience. Indeed, the allegations put forward by Michalkiewicz were widely commented upon and were eagerly taken up by my opponents. The attack was not against me alone. It was targeted towards the whole milieu that I represented. The aim was to undermine our legitimacy to speak about Polish issues by producing a public image of us as collaborators with the communist security apparatus. A lot of outstanding figures defended me then and signed a protest letter against the allegations.<sup>64</sup>

**PK:** *Let me move back to the period of your academic studies in Poznań. I would like to ask about the acquaintances that you made at that time, which became long friendships and which influenced your research and organizational work. It was at that time that you met Helena Chłopocka,<sup>65</sup> Jerzy Łukaszewski,<sup>66</sup> and Brygida Kürbis.<sup>67</sup>*

**JK:** Yes, that is true. I met Brygida Kürbis and Gerard Labuda in Poznań and we developed a very close, friendly relationship. Labuda was a little

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61 Stanisław Michalkiewicz (b.1947), Polish conservative political commentator, lawyer, former politician and opposition activist in communist Poland.

62 *Głos Katolicki*: a weekly in Polish language published from 1959 in Paris.

63 *Najwyższy Czas*: a Polish biweekly.

64 The invigilation of Jerzy Kłoczowski by the communist security services from 1964 to 1989 has been recently examined by Maciej Sobieraj, *Między oporem a lojalnością: Działania SB wobec KUL na przykładzie rozpracowania prof. Jerzego Kłoczowskiego* [Between resistance and loyalty: The operations of the Security Services towards the Catholic University of Lublin—A case study on the invigilation of professor Jerzy Kłoczowski] (Lublin: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2015).

65 Helena Chłopocka (1921–2011), Polish historian.

66 Jerzy Łukaszewski (b.1924), Polish lawyer, Rector of the College of Europe in Bruges (1972–90), Ambassador of Poland in France (1991–96).

67 Brygida Kürbis (1921–2001), Polish historian.



older than we were, but we soon became close. I would also like to mention Henryk Łowmiański,<sup>68</sup> who came to Poznań from Vilnius. He had lectures on the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and devoted a lot of attention to the issue of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. I owe a lot to these lectures, as they introduced me to the complex issue of the common Polish–Lithuanian history. The debate classes he held for a small group of students were also great. I remember being in awe of his enormous erudition and admirable historical knowledge, based on his perfect familiarity with the whole of Polish historiography. Henryk Łowmiański equipped me with a lot of the primary historical knowledge that I had a chance to develop in the future.

Until 1956, it was virtually impossible to organize any kind of research circle. The communist surveillance was overwhelming. All kinds of pressure exerted by the regime thwarted any serious attempts at collective action. After 1956, the situation started to improve. This is when I got in close touch with those Warsaw historians who had been active participants of the Home Army resistance. Among these people was Aleksander Gieysztor. He was well aware of the need for contemporary research on Christianity in Poland. I could always count on his help.

**PK:** *Your doctoral thesis was written in Toruń, when you took part in the seminar held by Karol Górski. It dealt with the history of the Dominican Order in fifteenth-century Prussia. You defended the dissertation in 1950, but the book you published six years later departed considerably from the text of the dissertation, as it concerned the history of the Dominicans in Silesia from the thirteenth until the fifteenth century. This 1956 publication was a cornerstone of your career. On the one hand, you addressed a topic that had been partly ignored; it was of some earlier interest mostly to the Dominicans themselves. You approached the topic with the use of contemporary research tools, inspired by the methodology of the French school of religious and social studies. It was a novel approach in Poland, which led to a seminal volume that still remains the primary source on the subject even today. On the other hand, your 1956 publication introduced a new trend: research on religious congregations and communities. This was your*

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68 Henryk Łowmiański (1898–1984), Polish historian.



*genuine contribution to Polish historiography, which also became a kind of flagship of your research portfolio.*

**JK:** The monograph published in 1956 talked about the Dominicans in Silesia, and it was a considerably modified version of my Ph.D. dissertation. I worked a lot to enhance this original text and to complete it. I needed a deeper insight into the legacy of the *Annales* school to be able to open this text to a set of new issues that I decided to include. As we are talking about my first book, I need to make mention of an important meeting that relates to it. The book had a good and lengthy summary in French, which was written by the wife of Jerzy Kalinowski, a researcher employed in the Faculty of Philosophy. The book was discovered by Jacques Le Goff, who came to Warsaw in, as far as I remember, 1958. He then came to Lublin, guided by Bronisław Gerecek. We met at my place and talked for a long time about the Dominicans. Le Goff knew the French summary of my book and he used it to ask me some detailed questions. He was predominantly interested in the relationship between the mendicants and the cities. This is how we developed closer contact and became friends.

When I was able to visit Paris for the first time in 1959, Gabriel Le Bras invited me to his place; he suggested that I visit him and make free use of his library. It was of great help to me, as his flat was in the very center of Paris, close to the Sorbonne. I spent a couple of weeks in his private library, as he had a wonderful collection of works on the history of Christianity. I actually had at my disposal all the books I needed. I also attended his classes at the Sorbonne, and I talked with him a lot about my research interests. While in Paris, I met many French historians with whom I stayed in touch later on. Among them was Georges Duby.<sup>69</sup> Thanks to all these people, I was able to delve deep into the area of social and religious history, and my contact with Le Bras was a key asset in this respect.

These early foreign visits also included inspiring stays at Leuven, where I met Leopold Génicot<sup>70</sup> and Roger Aubert.<sup>71</sup> I also met Italian

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69 Georges Duby (1919–96), French historian.

70 Leopold Génicot (1914–95), Belgian medievalist.

71 Roger Aubert (1914–2009), Belgian theologian and historian.

historians there, particularly with the organizers of the cyclical conference events in Passo della Mendola. This latter conference gathered leading experts in medieval history from a lot of countries, such as Christopher Brooke<sup>72</sup> from Britain and Kaspar Elm from Germany.<sup>73</sup> These were very interesting meetings, which encouraged unconstrained debate and helped develop friendly relations. There, I also met some Italian experts in medieval history, with whom I had an opportunity to cooperate at some later stage, for example Cinzio Violante.<sup>74</sup> I was invited to present my papers at these meetings, but for me, they were primarily a chance to get to know the latest trends in medieval historical research at the time.

**PK:** *The meetings and conferences you recall influenced your interests and research methodology. In your contributions from the 1960s and 1970s, one can easily observe these new areas of research and methodological solutions that created a chance for integrating the broader research in medieval history into the Polish domain. This is when your research hypotheses concerning the Christianization processes in Poland emerged. In fact, your premises referred to the broadly understood territories of the Polish state. In some of its more detailed aspects, your research focused on medieval religious history and culture in the whole variety of its content and forms. You have mentioned this kind of research during your classes at the Catholic University of Lublin, in particular during the master's and doctoral seminars. You came to Lublin just after your doctoral defence in 1950. How did this happen?*

**JK:** Among the people I got to know in Poznań, thanks to Krzysztof Kasznica and the Dominican Fathers, was Paweł Czarторыński,<sup>75</sup> who earned his doctoral degree in law at KUL. He talked about me with Rector Antoni Słomkowski,<sup>76</sup> who wrote me a letter with an invitation

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72 Christopher Brooke (1927–2015), British medievalist.

73 Kaspar Elm (b.1929), German historian.

74 Cinzio Violante (1921–2001), Italian medievalist.

75 Paweł Maria Czarторыński (1924–99), Polish historian.

76 Antoni Słomkowski (1900–82), Catholic priest and professor of theology, Rector of the Catholic University of Lublin (1946–49), in 1949 arrested for his refusal to instal the Communist Association of Polish Youth and sentenced to three years of imprisonment.

to Lublin to talk about career opportunities at KUL. I remember coming to Lublin in May 1950 together with Marzena Pollakówna,<sup>77</sup> whom I met in Poznań, and who was writing her doctoral thesis in Warsaw under the supervision of Professor Manteuffel. I suggested to her that we come to Lublin together, as I hoped she could also find a job at KUL. I had a long conversation with Rector Słomkowski, who officially offered me a position at KUL. Marzena Pollakówna was also given a job offer, but she only agreed to accept it the following year, as she still had other obligations. Soon afterwards, we were joined for a short period by Jerzy Łukaszewski, a student of Janusz Pajewski,<sup>78</sup> who taught classes in contemporary history.

Rector Słomkowski wished to reconstruct the university staff with the help of younger researchers. He was looking for people with an appropriate ideological background to be involved in the development of KUL. The 1950s witnessed the rise of a strong humanist team at KUL, gathering such outstanding scholars in various disciplines as philosophers Stefan Świeżawski<sup>79</sup> and Jerzy Kalinowski,<sup>80</sup> and language and literature researchers (philologists) like Marian Plezia,<sup>81</sup> Leokadia Małunowiczówna,<sup>82</sup> Przemysław Mroczkowski,<sup>83</sup> Czesław Zgorzelski,<sup>84</sup> and Irena Sławińska.<sup>85</sup> We often met to talk about our research projects. Of utmost importance was our own and our students' cooperation, which gave rise to a series of marvellous master's theses.

**PK:** *How did it happen that under a communist regime supported by Stalin and the Soviet security forces—openly hostile towards the Church—*

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77 Marzena Pollakówna (1926–71), Polish historian and medievalist.

78 Janusz Pajewski (1907–2003), Polish historian, soldier of the Home Army, after World War II professor of modern history at the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań.

79 Stefan Świeżawski (1907–2004), Polish philosopher, author of the eight-volume *History of European Philosophy in the Fifteenth Century* (1974–90).

80 Jerzy Dominik Maria Kalinowski (1916–2000), Polish historian of philosophy and logic, from 1958 in France.

81 Marian Plezia (1917–96), Polish classical philologist and lexicographer, editor-in-chief of the *Dictionary of medieval Latin in Poland*.

82 Leokadia Małunowiczówna (1910–80), Polish classical philologist.

83 Przemysław Mroczkowski (1915–2002), Polish literary historian and philologist.

84 Czesław Zgorzelski (1908–96), Polish philologist.

85 Irena Sławińska (1913–2004), Polish historian of literature.

*KUL was granted permission to operate? It is worth highlighting here that it was the first Polish university to open after World War II. In fact, it reopened even before the end of the war.*

**JK:** The communists, who took over the eastern Polish territories liberated by the Red Army, and who represented the so-called Lublin Poland, did not feel too confident about their rule. The talks between the London government and Stalin were still going on. The postwar reactivation of KUL was also supported by General Nicolai Bulganin—Stalin's representative in the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN)—who participated in the official inauguration of the academic year in Lublin. This was a precedent and a concession on the part of the communists. It was one of the gestures to prove to the Western Allies that Stalin was open-minded about the future of postwar Poland. We also need to keep in mind the role played by Rector Antoni Słomkowski, who first consulted representatives of the underground state. They decided that, given the political circumstances of the time, reopening KUL was out of the question. This is why Słomkowski decided to negotiate directly with the PKWN. He realized that, because military opposition to the communists was not an option, the only choice was to encourage cultural resistance, which had a long-lasting, nineteenth-century tradition. The primate of Poland, August Hlond,<sup>86</sup> who returned to Poland in 1945, was fully aware that neither the USA nor Great Britain were going to defend Poland against Stalin and that some other methods of survival needed to be found. Hence, it was decided that the Poles should protect as much of their public freedom as possible. KUL was intended to be an oasis of freedom and a center of cultural resistance against the communist regime.

**PK:** *You began your career at the Catholic University of Lublin in 1950, and it lasted for half a century. This is where you earned subsequent research titles, including full professor in 1973. It was also here that you initiated vital re-*

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<sup>86</sup> August Hlond (1881–1948), primate (highest ranking Church official) in Poland, appointed as archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw in 1946.

*search projects on the history of Christianity, and it was here that you built a research community which you managed. How did your work at KUL begin?*

**JK:** In the autumn of 1950, I moved to Lublin with my wife and my son Piotr. One of the unforgettable experiences of my first year of work in Lublin was finding out that there were about four hundred candidates planning to study history. It was an exceptional year, as many people were rejected at the state universities all over Poland, mostly for political and ideological reasons. This explains why there were so many candidates for historical studies coming to KUL in 1950. It was an extraordinary experience, because when I began my studies in Poznań, there were just five of us, whereas in 1950, almost a hundred times more candidates came. Little did I know that I would have to work with such throngs of students when I decided on my university position in Lublin. I was not sure then how to teach and how it was going to work. The lectures were held in the largest university lounge, later named "Old Lounge." The students filled the lounge to the limit. They occupied the windowsills, and some of them needed to find room behind my back. It was amazing, indeed.

**PK:** *From the very beginning, your position at KUL was extremely advantageous and encouraged your pursuit of research and instructional projects. It seems you came to KUL with a ready-made academic curriculum and ideas to educate young historians.*

**JK:** Yes, I did have an extraordinarily advantageous position, as from the very beginning, I could enjoy the full autonomy of a young academic. My superior was Professor Leon Białkowski,<sup>87</sup> who greeted me with hospitality and introduced me to my duties at KUL. He had a strong connection with Poznań, since he earned his doctoral degree there, and he deeply appreciated the historical school in Poznań, including Kazimierz Tymieniecki. Professor Białkowski was already seriously ill at that time, and he died two years later. During my first year of work, I conducted my classes as I was told to. However, the follow-

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87 Leon Białkowski (1885–1952), Polish historian and editor of sources.

ing year, I decided to run a seminar in medieval history for several students whom I found particularly clever and whom I selected for that class. I also chose the topics of their theses. I wanted to work in a small group, which could allow a thorough and comprehensive education in studies of medieval sources and research methodology.

**PK:** *These first years of your work at KUL were far from easy. You have mentioned large numbers of students and limited space for classes. One also needs to add that you needed to create the curricula and materials indispensable for the educational process. Some of these materials, such as the paleographic or codicological tables, homemade by Marzena Pollakówna, were used over the subsequent decades as teaching tools. In addition, the MA curriculum in history that you created in the 1950s kept its validity almost unchanged until the 1990s. This educational program emphasized the need to rely on practice-oriented education: the introduction to historical research in the first year took ninety hours to complete and the course on the auxiliary sciences in historical research took two years.*

**JK:** My main focus was to create a program for educating historians that would encourage their thorough research of sources and equip them with the necessary tools for critical analysis. I was supported by Marzena Pollakówna, whom I have already mentioned, and Zygmunt Sułowski,<sup>88</sup> whom I invited from Poznań, and who completed his master's in history at the Jagiellonian University. Sułowski sought a job at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, but with his Home Army background he had no chance to work at any state university in that period. Therefore, he came to KUL, and we cooperated on this new historical academic curriculum. As I have already said, I focused predominantly on the medieval history seminar, where I selected very diligent students, among whom many became my future associates. I really wanted all my students to have a sound background in historical research and a good orientation in contemporary historiographic trends. Introduction to historical research was a key subject in teaching students the basics of the researcher's craft. The auxiliary sciences

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88 Zygmunt Sułowski (1920–95), Polish historian.

were also crucial, particularly historical geography and cartography. The practical knowledge of Latin was paramount, too, as it was a prerequisite for any effective work with the sources.

I meticulously observed students in their first year, and the best of them were invited to participate in my seminar in their second year. I made it clear to them that participating in my seminar would mean working on tough topics. Each of them needed to browse through the relevant literature before starting their own research. One of the best seminars I remember was launched in 1952. I cooperated with Marzena Pollakówna and Zygmunt Sułowski then. Dozens of students took part, having previously participated in an intensive preparatory course. A lot of students who later became outstanding scholars were there—people who were able to engage in serious public activities. Among them were Eugeniusz Wiśniowski,<sup>89</sup> Wiesław Müller,<sup>90</sup> and Stanisław Litak.<sup>91</sup> In cooperation with my students, I launched a long-term project devoted to comparative research on the processes of deep Christianization. It was conducted with state-of-the-art methodology at the time, based on the French patterns of the social and religious historical school. I was attracted by the vast expanses of our research topic. In fact, I was also encouraged to investigate it by many people. Gradually, throughout the 1950s, I introduced lectures on Marc Bloch's work to my program. They were helpful in preparing young historians for the demands of contemporary historical research. I also taught the introduction to historical research, drawing upon my own experience from Poznań, where these classes were held in an exemplary way. I tried to introduce to the program all those elements which I found indispensable, and I needed the help of others. At that time, Hanna Dylągowa<sup>92</sup> began her career at KUL. She is my wife Krystyna's sister, and she completed her doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Stefan Kieniewicz.

**PK:** *In 1950, you began your efforts to build a center for the study of history at the Faculty of Humanities at KUL. You invited a number of people*

89 Eugeniusz Wiśniowski (1929–2008), Polish historian.

90 Wiesław Müller (b.1929), Polish historian.

91 Stanisław Litak (1932–2010), Polish historian.

92 Hanna Dylągowa (1928–2016), Polish historian.



*to cooperate with you, some of whom came there from other centers. Marzenna Pollakówna worked at KUL for only a couple of years before moving to Warsaw, while Zygmunt Sutoński stayed at KUL for good. You also had good students, whom you trained through your advanced medieval seminar. Among them, there were many students who became outstanding historians and your later associates. It was with these people that you managed to realize a number of pioneering research projects concerning the history of Christianity in Poland. You tried to provide these young researchers with opportunities at the time when it was extremely difficult to find a job at a university or get a foreign scholarship.*

**JK:** Many of the people mentioned here represent my first group of seminar students, who wrote excellent studies and whom I wanted to employ. I did my best to send my associates on scholarships abroad, so that they could have access to publications unavailable in Poland. My French and Belgian contacts turned out to be a crucial resource in this respect. I also made an effort to invite foreign historians to lecture at KUL and share their knowledge with our students and staff. In Lublin, I succeeded in having a number of outstanding historians visit, such as Jacques Le Goff and Christopher Brooke. I thought in those days we needed to prevent becoming isolated from the rest of the world. I wanted to overcome this isolation by keeping contact with foreign research centers, so that we would remain part of contemporary academic debates on the most vital issues in European history. This is how my research projects devoted to the history of Christianity came into being. I wanted our research to be more dependent on the methods of historical geography.

I was wholeheartedly supported in these actions by Stanisław Herbst. We discussed my planned research on the network of religious orders and parishes, which enabled our close cooperation with his university. We agreed that our *Atlas of the History of the Church in Poland* was not a viable project, unless we effectively researched the ecclesiastic structures first. This project required the launch of a new Institute of the Historical Geography of the Church in Poland.<sup>93</sup> Car-

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<sup>93</sup> The Institute of Historical Geography of the Church in Poland was established in 1956 as an interdisciplinary research institution within the Catholic University of Lublin, headed for forty years by Jerzy Kłoczowski.



dinal Stefan Wyszyński, the primate of Poland, showed interest in this research initiative and offered financial support for its completion. His support, as well as that expressed by Rev. Professor Marian Rechowicz, meant a lot to me, because not all the clergy at the time understood the sense of this initiative. They found it difficult to accept the engagement of lay historians in research on Christianity. I also appreciated the support offered by Rev. Professor Piotr Kałwa, who had been educated in Lviv, studying under the supervision of Władysław Abraham.<sup>94</sup> I also want to mention the cooperation of Bishop Karol Wojtyła of Cracow.<sup>95</sup> Out of his initiative and inspiration, I organized three large scientific conferences devoted to the history of the Diocese of Cracow and an important conference devoted to St. Stanislaus, held in the year of the nine hundredth anniversary of this death. This latter conference gathered the best Polish specialists in medieval history, including Gerard Labuda with his remarkable paper.<sup>96</sup> I enjoyed a close and friendly relationship with Karol Wojtyła. He showed his deep understanding for the research I conducted, and he supported my comparative research projects in the field of the history of Polish Christianity. In 1981, I was asked by John Paul II to organize a conference in the Vatican devoted to the Christian legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Later on, an Institute of John Paul II was launched, headed by Marian Radwan.<sup>97</sup>

My contacts with the historians at the Catholic University of Leuven also need to be acknowledged. They were very instrumental for us all here in Lublin. Many of my associates had an opportunity to visit Leuven. They sometimes won yearly scholarships, which gave them a chance to have full access to the historical sources and relevant literature. All this was possible thanks to the help of Belgian historians, particularly Joseph De Smet.<sup>98</sup> Thanks to his efforts, we also began to co-

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94 Władysław Abraham (1860–1941), Polish lawyer and historian.

95 Elected as Pope John Paul II in 1978.

96 For more details on the organization of these conferences and the controversy they caused among Church historians, see Gerard Labuda, “Wznowienie dyskursu w sprawie męczeństwa i świętości biskupa krakowskiego Stanisława” [A new take on the issue of the martyrdom and sanctity of Stanislaus, Bishop of Cracow], *Nasza Przyszłość* 108 (2007): 5–57.

97 Marian Radwan (b.1936), Polish historian and priest.

98 Joseph De Smet (1916–96), Belgian historian.

operate with *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* and *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, which gave rise to a number of publications on the history of Polish Christianity. Due to this cooperation, we were able to present the results of our research in the international arena.

**PK:** *In a natural way, you became a leader of a new school of historical research that came into being in the early 1960s at KUL. It was a group of young historians, who examined ecclesiastic structures and religious culture, and whose works laid the foundation for the wide-scale research on the history of Polish Christianity. You succeeded in finding people who got involved in the research projects you initiated, and who worked under your supervision on master's and doctoral theses. Later, they contributed important texts to the publications you were in charge of. This group of researchers included the figures that have already been mentioned above, like Eugeniusz Wiśniowski and Stanisław Litak, but worthy of mention are others like S. Aleksandra Witkowska,<sup>99</sup> S. Urszula Borkowska<sup>100</sup> and for some time also Józef Szymański.<sup>101</sup> The first publication issued by this working group was a two-volume book entitled *Kościół w Polsce* (The Church in Poland), published by the Cracow-based publishing house Znak in 1969.<sup>102</sup> Thus, you succeeded in creating and supervising a team of researchers that grew to become the KUL school of historical research. What did this team-building process look like?*

**JK:** In most cases, the research career of these people consisted in expanding their master's or doctoral research projects. My first MA graduates left KUL in 1955, and I encouraged some of them to take up research careers. An opportunity presented itself at that time to create a research program that could help develop a strong cadre of historical researchers in Lublin. Historical geography was at the core of our research interests. We wanted to use it as a tool to better understand social history. Our research on religious orders and parishes was intend-

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<sup>99</sup> S. Aleksandra Witkowska (b.1930), Polish Ursuline, professor of the humanities, medievalist.

<sup>100</sup> S. Urszula Borkowska (1935–2014), Polish Ursuline, historian and medievalist.

<sup>101</sup> Józef Szymański (1931–2011), Polish historian.

<sup>102</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, ed., *Kościół w Polsce I–II, Studia nad Historią Kościoła Katolickiego w Polsce* (Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 1966–1969).

ed to put us closer to the life of these historical communities. I wanted to create a group of people who could work in various historical epochs yet rely on similar methodological solutions. The book you mentioned, *The Church in Poland*, is an undeniably crucial work, but it was not our first collective publication concerning the history of Christianity in Poland. In the autumn of 1965, there was a special edition of the journal *Znak* entitled *The Development of the Ecclesiastic Structures in Poland*,<sup>103</sup> which was to commemorate the millennial jubilee of Polish Christianity. Yet *The Church in Poland* is important, as it is our first holistic, synthetic work, which gathered wide public recognition and became a point of departure for our future work on the history of Christianity in Poland. This book presented the results of our basic research on the history of the structural organization of Church institutions in medieval and modern Poland. I must admit that our original plans were more ambitious, but we failed to attain all that we wanted.

My team had a number of important achievements, widely recognized in Poland and abroad. It was my original idea to make our publications more widely known abroad. This is why we published a lot in French and why we included reports from our research in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*.

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**PK:** *When you were a student in Poznań and then during your first years of your academic career at KUL, the doctrine of Stalinism was getting more and more powerful. What is your interpretation of that phenomenon? You were a young Pole educated in harmony with the patriotic tradition of the Second Polish Republic. What was your outlook on the postwar communist regime installed in Poland—which was an obvious contradiction to the idea of the historical continuity of the Polish independence? The Stalinist years brought primitive indoctrination in the spirit of Marxist materialism, overwhelming infiltration, brutal elimination of political opposition, and an open confrontation with the Catholic Church. How did you perceive all these phenomena—as a researcher at KUL, an institution that was allowed to function under the new regime?*

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103 "Rozwój organizacji kościoła w Polsce," *Znak* 137/8 (Nov./Dec. 1965).

**JK:** We were all affected by the changes, but let me also stress that our Polish spirit of resistance, a kind of intrinsic rebellion against Stalinism, was much stronger than in any other nation within the Soviet Bloc. Polish society was much stronger, irrespective of the recent tragedy of the Nazi occupation. When introducing communism, Stalin himself was fully aware that the Poles needed be handled subtly. There is a well-known saying attributed to Stalin, who reputedly said that introducing communism in Poland would be like saddling a cow. He was afraid of strong Polish resistance in case the Russian actions were interpreted as too radical. He knew that the Poles were capable of staging a revolt when pressed. When the political thaw started and Władysław Gomułka<sup>104</sup> became the communist leader in October 1956, the Soviet army started to direct its forces to Warsaw. Then the Polish workers began to mobilize defensive forces in case Warsaw was attacked. There was the sense of an approaching war that I remembered from the days just before the Warsaw Uprising. Being able to predict the potential tragic consequences, Nikita Khrushchev<sup>105</sup> came to Warsaw and reached an agreement with Gomułka.

**PK:** *When the communists brutally eliminated the political and military opposition in Poland, the Catholic Church remained the only institution that was allowed to function officially under the regime. Yet its activities were gradually curtailed, and the clergy found themselves under the systematic infiltration by the security forces. Despite the fact that a group of clergymen—the so-called patriotic priests—agreed to support the communists and boycott their own bishops, the Polish Church managed to keep its integrity and independence. To a large extent, this was thanks to the attitude of the charismatic primate of Poland, Stefan Wyszyński.<sup>106</sup> He tried first to work out some modus vivendi with the new authorities. Being unable to do so, in 1953 he openly protested against the growing*

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<sup>104</sup> Władysław Gomułka (1905–1982), member of the Polish Communist Party, imprisoned between 1951 and 1954, between 1956 and 1970 First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party.

<sup>105</sup> Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev (1894–1971), First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1953–64).

<sup>106</sup> Stefan Wyszyński (1901–81), archbishop of Gniezno and Warsaw (1948–81), primate of all Poland, from 1953 Cardinal.

*state intervention into matters of the Church, for which he was interned for three years.*

**JK:** Stefan Wyszyński was an outstanding church leader, who knew how to talk to the communists. He played a game with them, and he ultimately succeeded. Wyszyński evaded an open confrontation with the communists. He was looking for a compromise, but not at all costs and definitely not at the cost of disturbing the Church's pastoral activities or accepting state intervention into the internal matters of the Church. In his defence of the freedom of the Church, he uttered the famous *Non possumus* in 1953. He was sentenced to solitary confinement for three years. The new first secretary of the Communist Party, Władysław Gomułka, freed him in October 1956. Gomułka sent his own people to Wyszyński and apologized for the persecutions.

**PK:** *In contrast to countries like Czechoslovakia or Hungary, Poland enjoyed far greater intellectual freedom. In Stalinist times, the regime was relentlessly trying to impose its control over universities and the Academy of Sciences, which was launched in 1951. The unwelcome professors were fired and their contact with students was limited. Yet, despite all these persecutions, historians did retain a relative freedom of research, access to Western research literature, and opportunities to cooperate with research centers beyond the Iron Curtain. Poland did not suffer the complete domination of the regime over scholarly circles, as was the case in Hungary after 1956 or Czechoslovakia after 1968. Thousands of people escaped from Hungary after the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. János Bak was among those escapees. After the Prague Spring, many unwanted researchers were expelled from universities and the Academy of Sciences. František Šmahel was one of them. How do you remember the echoes of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Poland?*

**JK:** I remember that time quite well. We were supportive of the Hungarians and enthusiastic about what was going on there. In Poland, history took a different turn. Gomułka reached for power and promised changes. He freed Stefan Wyszyński and prevented a Russian military intervention. He was the only leader of the Polish Commu-

nists who was able to win some public support, and many people believed in the changes he promised. In our circles, we fully understood the Hungarian aspirations. During our meetings with Western colleagues, we tried to explain communism to them, but—alas!—they often failed to realize what was going on behind the Iron Curtain.

**PK:** *The Prague Spring broke out twelve years later. Like the Hungarian and Polish revolts of 1956, this revolution evoked high expectations and enormous enthusiasm among our southern neighbors. The suppression of the Prague Spring ended with a political cleansing among researchers, while academic institutions were put under even closer scrutiny by the Communist Party. This was when František Šmahel lost his position in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and was banned from any form of research for twenty years.*

**JK:** The suppression of the Prague Spring brought about dramatic political persecution of Czech academics. The scale of that intervention surpassed anything that the communists ever did to scholars in Poland. The fate of František Šmahel is a symbolic exemplification of the tragic process that affected hundreds of Czech intellectuals, and that paralyzed academic life in Czechoslovakia for decades. I remember that many Poles felt great solidarity with the Czechs. The most tragic part of this history is that the Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia was assisted by the Polish army. Polish participation was decided upon by the communists, and it was widely criticized by the Polish public.

I remember František Šmahel's visits to Poland after 1968, when he was expelled from the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Polish medieval historians repeatedly invited him to conferences and helped him to publish his works, which he was forbidden to do in Czechoslovakia. We hosted František with open hearts, and we tried to help him as much as we could. There was an extraordinary solidarity between Polish historians and persecuted colleagues in Czechoslovakia.

**PK:** *When did you first meet František Šmahel? Was it after the suppression of the Prague Spring?*

**JK:** I am trying to recall when and where we met for the first time. I visited Prague and Bratislava to meet the historians. I remember that we were in touch with Czech historians thanks to *Tygodnik Powszechny* (The Catholic Weekly), and my first visit to Prague was organized by the Catholic circle there. Thanks to these people, I was able to meet Jan Patočka. We talked about how to resist communism. These were mostly personal, friendly relations, which went beyond the official co-operation of the Polish and Czechoslovak research institutions.

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**PK:** *The number and the wide thematic scope of your publications are striking. The list contains thirty books and over one thousand articles, which testifies best to your extremely solid scholarly work. If I were to suggest a short synthetic description of your contributions, I would say that your point of departure was in a relatively narrow topic—one could say a microhistorical study—of the history of the Dominican Order in Silesia from the thirteenth until the fifteenth century. Yet you were gradually expanding the scope of your interests to cover the history of the mendicant orders in Poland, and then of the whole monastic movement from antiquity until today. Looking at the subsequent titles of your books—whether monographs or co-edited volumes—one can easily observe this expansion of the field of research explorations. Gradually, works on the history of the church come into view, on the history of Christianity in Poland, and later also on East Central Europe. Then came the volumes devoted to the history of Poland and of the macroregion which you named “a younger Europe.” The majority of your publications reveal traces of the omnipresent medieval perspective. For example, you often emphasize the need to start historical analyses from the epoch that laid the foundations of European Christianity and culture.*

**JK:** My research is related closely to the methodological approach adopted by the representatives of the *Annales* school. However, I was also influenced in my writing by such authors as Georges Duby and Gabriel Le Bras, who were not directly connected with the *Annales* approach; yet they were often regarded as related. Having read various publications representative of the *Annales* school or works of other scholars like Christopher Brooke, Cinzio Violante, and Kaspar Elm, I always strove to



present various historical phenomena in a comparative perspective. The works of all these authors and their conference papers always stress the role of the foundations of European culture. They also look for common denominators underlying European civilization. The history of the Dominican Order was a good point of departure for my analyses, since the Dominicans went through a period of rapid growth soon after their foundation, with new friaries spreading all over Europe. My research on the history of the Dominicans in Silesia, and later in other regions, led me naturally towards the general topic of medieval Christianity. This, in turn, allowed me to study Christianization processes in their various forms. The history of the Dominicans was directly related to the crucial historical phenomena that shaped the history of the church and Europe. These study areas enabled my research on the formation of the European cultural space and on what is often called European identity.

My interest in that research area had been awakened by Kazimierz Tymieniecki's lectures, which I further developed through my reading and listening to numerous conference papers. As I have already mentioned, Tymieniecki sparked my interest in the works of Henri Pirenne, who started to write his book about Europe when imprisoned in the German POW camp. We need to keep in mind that histories written before World War II mostly represented a narrowly defined, national point of view. Pirenne and the generation of historians writing after World War II were the first to perceive historical research in a different way. In his view, the researcher reaches beyond the narrow scope of the history of one's own nation. I am privileged to have met representatives of this generation of historians who adopted a new and broader perspective on the history of Europe in their texts.

Let me also observe that when my associates and I began this wide-scope research program concerning the history of Polish Christianity, the topic was not of serious interest to historians. Some of the works on the topic had been written by the remarkable Lviv historian Władysław Abraham, but they mostly concentrated on the history of the ecclesiastic institutions. A lot of inspiration came from the studies conducted by Rev. Professor Jan Fijałek<sup>107</sup> in Cracow, but the most fundamental

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<sup>107</sup> Jan Fijałek (1926–97), Polish historian.



source-based research on the history of Polish Christianity was still missing. There were no synthetic works on the role of Christianity for Polish culture, and the approach developed by the French school of social and religious historical studies had no representation in the Polish research at all. Hence, it was also vital for us to adopt a comparative stance and an integrated approach to the history of Christianity, which had not been adopted before World War II. The vital point was a change in perspective: from a narrow scope of researching particular states or state institutions towards a broad scope of research on society and culture.

**PK:** *You have introduced a new approach to researching the history of Christianity to the field of Polish historiography. Your approach marked a departure from the classical perception of the history of the church in its Catholic version, or even in its Protestant version or versions. The social and religious historical research was a new trend, using an open, comparative methodology. How did you formulate your objectives when founding the historical research environment at KUL?*

**JK:** I adopted this research approach at quite an early stage of my career and its choice was strictly conditioned by my interests in the French school of social history, represented by the historians publishing in *Annales*—like Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, and Gabriel Le Bras. I was particularly influenced by Le Bras's works, whom I first met in the Cracow Old Market when he first visited Poland in the autumn of 1958. Simultaneously, in the Vatican, a conclave was being held, in the wake of which Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was elected Pope John XXIII.<sup>108</sup> When Le Bras learned about the result of the conclave, he was overjoyed. He told me he had known Roncalli well, and he had cooperated with him for a long time. Charles de Gaulle asked Roncalli to help put to order the matters of the French church, where many bishops had been directly involved in Vichy France. Le Bras was enthusiastic about his cooperation with Roncalli, and he claimed that Roncalli would make a great pope. He was right. Le Bras began re-

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<sup>108</sup> John XXIII (1881–1963), pope (1958–63).

searching the history of the church in a novel way. He adopted a social history outlook, in the spirit of the *Vaticanum Secundum*,<sup>109</sup> which was a breakthrough in the postwar history of the church. This approach to ecclesiastic research was also intensively developed by Dominicans like Yves Congar. Apart from Congar, there were numerous Dominican historians who had close relations with the *Annales* school. I remember Jacques Le Goff telling me about his long conversations with Father Dominique-Marie Chenu regarding twelfth-century philosophy. It was this group of theologians and historians that gave the impulse for the perception of the church as God's People on their way to the Father—so prominent during the Second Vatican Council.

**PK:** *In Poland, you acted as a pioneer who had to challenge the traditional historiography of the church, with the history of institutions in the foreground. It was the way of researching the history of the church adopted mostly by the clergy at theological faculties. As a lay person, you must have had a lot of difficulty promoting a new vision of the social history of the church.*

**JK:** Yes, it was troublesome, indeed, and many historians of the church did not understand my approach. Nevertheless, there were also people who were able to assess rightly the importance of the new research methodology, such as Professor Marian Rechowicz at KUL. While the social history of the church was hardly recognized in Poland, it had already been widely recognized in the West, such as in Paris and Leuven. In the documents defining a modern concept of the church, the Second Vatican Council initiated a new approach. It led to a breakthrough that paved the way to a new style in the study of the history of the church. This style developed throughout the decades to come, in the spirit of the approach developed by Le Bras and the *Annales* school. I could always count on the support of Primate Stefan Wyszyński and Archbishop of Cracow Karol Wojtyła for my projects promoting this new approach to studying the history of the church. In the 1970s, Wojtyła, who had a strong philosophical background, asked me for

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109 The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (*Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum Secundum*) (1962–1965). Called by John XXIII it addressed relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world.

help in organizing three congresses concerning the history of the Diocese of Cracow.

**PK:** *Just before his death, Gerard Labuda—a remarkable scholar of medieval history—managed to publish a collection of essays devoted to the Polish historiography of the twentieth century. He dedicated some of his remarks to you. He emphasized the originality and the vast scope of your research explorations. As he observed, your research activity expanded in a creative way the axiology introduced to historical research by Karol Górski. This new axiology marked a transition from a “traditional historiography of the Church, permeated by the reflection on the event-oriented history, related to institutions and missionary activities, towards a historiography centered around the intrinsic, spiritual, philosophical reflection in real time and space.”*<sup>110</sup>

*Let me make a short digression here. The first of your publications that I read was the popular yet scholarly book entitled From the Hermitage to the Community,<sup>111</sup> which I happened to buy in Warsaw in the late 1980s. The book was addressed to a wide public and it contained a history of monasticism with the aim to present its genesis and the dynamic evolution of various religious communities. These communities tried to put Christ’s call for perfection into practice. Later, I also read your other books. However, this first title seems a very apt, synthetic description of your research legacy. Your works exhibit your quest for what is shared, without ignoring the diversity and differences. Your books betray your interest in community life—small and large, that of the hermit and of the monastery, of a national community and of the European cultural community. This interest in all sorts of communities, which make up the structure of larger human societies, can be traced in the great number of your contributions.*

**JK:** “Community phenomena” can take diverse forms, and this diversity needs to be studied in real time and space. When this condition is met,

<sup>110</sup> Gerard Labuda, *O historykach: Kto jest kim w dziejopisarstwie polskim* [On historians: Who is who in Polish historiography] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010), 113–15, here 113.

<sup>111</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Od pustelni do wspólnoty: Grupy zakonne w wielkich religiach świata* [From the Hermitage to the community: Monastic communities in the major world religions] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1987).

communities make a fascinating research subject. Christianity is a great power that inspires many fraternal communities all over the world. We are more and more aware of the fact that Europe has not been created by big empires, but by thousands of small communities of various kinds. Monastic communities were an important part of this process.

My book *From the Hermitage to the Community* was an attempt to attract the Polish reader to a different style of thinking about history. I only posed some basic problems relating to the history of community life seen in the *longue durée* perspective in various cultural areas. I primarily intended to compare the religious orders born out of the Christian culture with similar monastic forms known to other religions. In this way, I was also able to establish the research potential that comparative historical analysis offers.

**PK:** *Looking at the research experience of you and your associates, one can conclude that your team achievements are tremendous. Yet I would like to ask, what is it that you think you failed to achieve? Are there any projects that were abandoned or left incomplete?*

**JK:** Unfortunately, I did not succeed in each and every project I planned. The synthetic monographs, published as the series *Dzieje chrześcijaństwa w Polsce i Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów* (The History of Christianity in Poland and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), were planned as a continuation of the research initiated in the 1960s. We launched this series ten years ago, but we have only managed to publish five volumes so far. Our initial plans were far more ambitious; we planned on publishing several books more. We thought that the pace of publishing books would be faster. I leave this task to a younger generation of historians.

We have succeeded in publishing works on the history of Polish Christianity in French and Italian, even though it often was an extremely difficult task. The idea of internationalizing our research encountered opposition, despite the fact that our research topic was highly relevant to the international historical debate and offered significant opportunities for comparative historical research. To attain these objectives, I published my synthetic *History of Polish Christianity* with

Cambridge University Press in 2000,<sup>112</sup> largely thanks to the support and dedication of Christopher Brooke. In spite of the indisputable achievements that allowed international recognition of our research on Christianity, I am fully aware of the fact that we could have been more effective. It is true, however, that many of our efforts encountered a lack of understanding and support.

**PK:** *Thanks to your publications and contacts, you have won wide recognition in international historical circles. You were invited as a visiting professor by European and American universities. You took active part in creating and editing important synthetic works on the history of Christianity and Europe. It is enough to mention the fourteen-volume Histoire du christianisme<sup>113</sup> and the Histoire de l'Europe du Center Est.<sup>114</sup> The international recognition that you earned through your hard work served to promote Polish historical research and encourage international scholars to become more involved in researching the history of Poland and of other countries in our macroregion. Your strong professional position enabled you to lend important support to various initiatives promoting open debate about the past and showing that this debate is crucial for the future of Europe and the world. This purpose was also central to your activities within UNESCO, where for several years you played an important role of the chair of its Polish committee.*

**JK:** I have always done my best to promote debate about the past on the international level, even though this debate often touched upon issues that are a bone of contention for some neighboring nations. This is why I initiated our long-term cooperation between Belarusian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian historians, with the intention of working out new syntheses of the histories of our countries. Through long and difficult discussions, we sought to view the history of our nations in the wider context of the history of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, but without dividing this history into narrow, ethnic perspectives.

<sup>112</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, *A History of Polish Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>113</sup> Jean-Marie Mayeur, et al., eds., *Histoire du christianisme*, 14 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1990–2001).

<sup>114</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, ed., *Histoire de l'Europe du Center Est*, 2 vols. (Paris: PUF, 2004) (Polish edition: Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1999).

Instead, we promoted a vision in which this history is a shared legacy of all the four nations. Each nation has its own right to refer to this history and draw inspiration from it.

The Commission Internationale d'Histoire et d'Études du Christianisme (CIHEC) was a marvellous forum for international cooperation in the field of research on the history of Christianity. We actively participated in endeavours of this institution from its earliest days. We delivered our papers at the CIHEC annual conferences, and later, we were granted the role of organizers of large-scale CIHEC congresses. First, we succeeded in organizing a CIHEC colloquium in 1971 in Warsaw, devoted to the historical geography of the church in Poland. The materials from that colloquium were published later thanks to the effort of the Belgian historian Roger Aubert. Seven years later, Warsaw hosted a CIHEC congress with hundreds of historians of Christianity from all over Europe.

**PK:** *Organizing a scholarly event of that size in 1978 must have been an extremely challenging task for you and your team. How did you manage to succeed and why did this CIHEC congress take place in Warsaw, rather than Lublin?*

**JK:** The Warsaw CIHEC Congress was co-organized with the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Organizing an event of that size would not have been possible without the support we enjoyed in the 1960s from Tadeusz Manteuffel. He was able to convince the communists that CIHEC was an insignificant organization that should not be feared. This is why we succeeded in launching a Polish commission of CIHEC at the Polish Academy of Sciences. It was the first national commission to be created in a Soviet Bloc country. Interestingly enough, we were accepted to CIHEC together with the Soviet commission, even though our Polish one had been constituted some years before.

The 1978 CIHEC Congress was a huge organizational challenge. Hundreds of outstanding specialists from the West attended. For a lot of them, the congress was an authentic and deeply moving discovery of Poland, its history and culture. Organizing this event was only possi-

ble thanks to the friendly support of the Warsaw circle of researchers. It was understood that the organizational work engaged almost all the staff of the Section of History at KUL. The Congress participants paid a visit to Primate Stefan Wyszyński. They were deeply impressed by the primate's personality. In his speech, Wyszyński spoke about the best aspects of Polish history, of the shared space for people of various denominations, cultures, and nationalities. Many of the participants were genuinely moved by his words.

**PK:** *Your individual and team research on the history of Christianity was gradually opening to the issues in the history of East Central Europe. Continuing the thought of Oskar Halecki,<sup>115</sup> you tried to show in a series of works the cultural links of the region with European civilization, yet without neglecting its peculiarities, stemming directly from its dramatic history. These works ultimately led up to your synthetic History of East Central Europe.*

**JK:** Halecki's works were important to me, but they were only one source of inspiration that triggered my interest in the history of East Central Europe. Equally important to me was the political thought of Jerzy Giedroyc,<sup>116</sup> the founder of the Parisian *Kultura* and its intellectual environment. I knew him well and enjoyed the privilege of talking with him many times. I agreed with his view that we needed to do our utmost to enhance our communication with our neighbors. I believe that many people of my generation shared the same opinion about the reasons for the tragic isolation of Poland in 1939. We realized the cost of Poland being left stranded in 1939, with Romania being perhaps the only state to show some sympathetic reaction to our fate. This awareness made us believe that Poland should look for paths to mutual understanding with her neighbors. It was already during World War II that the Polish exiles suggested an initiative to build a Polish-Czech federation, which was a direct attempt to overcome our political isolation. I discussed these matters in various research circles, and when an

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<sup>115</sup> Oskar Halecki (1891–1973), Polish historian, social and Catholic activist.

<sup>116</sup> Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000), Polish writer and political activist.



opportunity for cooperation among historians from our countries presented itself, I got willingly involved in the project. John Paul II expressed his deep understanding of this initiative. He accepted my proposal, and in the spring of 1990 he invited to the Vatican historians and intellectuals from Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine to have a common debate of the heritage on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was the first meeting in a series, which finally gave rise to our common research projects and paved the way to a series of histories of our four countries. Let me add that the meeting with John Paul II was also attended by émigré historians.

I also recall my 1975 visit to San Francisco, where the Eighteenth General Convention of Historical Sciences was held. I delivered a paper on the comparative research on thirteenth-century history, followed by my lectures at various American universities. One of these lectures was held at Harvard in the Center for Ukrainian Studies. I was surprised to find out that all the Ukrainians attending my lecture spoke Polish. I learned then that these Ukrainians had regular courses in Polish and Russian. At that time, I had interesting conversations with Ihor Ševčenko<sup>117</sup> and Omeljan Pritsak,<sup>118</sup> with whom I talked about the common heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Professor Pritsak emphasized the fact that researching Ukrainian history calls for a good knowledge of Polish. What I learned from this meeting was this common thinking about the past.

**PK:** *It seems it was this very moment when you started researching East Central Europe. Beginning with the comparative history of Christianity on the eastern peripheries of Europe, you moved towards constructing a synthetic panorama of the history and culture of the region. This new research resulted in the work Europa Słowiańska (Slavic Europe),<sup>119</sup> published in 1984. Fourteen years later, your book entitled Młodsza Europa*

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<sup>117</sup> Ihor Ševčenko (1922–2009), Polish-born philologist and historian of Ukrainian origin.

<sup>118</sup> Omeljan Pritsak (1919–2006), Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University and the founder and first director (1973–89) of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

<sup>119</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Europa Słowiańska w XIV–XV wieku* [Slavic Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries] (Warsaw: PIW, 1984).



*(The younger Europe)<sup>120</sup> was published, quickly winning wide recognition among historians and assuming its place in the international historiographic debate.*

**JK:** I cannot remember exactly when I first used the concept of East Central Europe. My growing interest in the history of the region was triggered by a meeting in the mid-1970s, which took place somewhere near Poznań. It was a working meeting of the Medieval Commission of the Polish Historical Association. Bronisław Geremek, Henryk Samsonowicz, and I delivered our papers, in which we argued that there was a need for a comparative approach to the histories of the states in our part of Europe. I think we were already using the concept of East Central Europe at that time. The topic constantly recurred at various conferences and meetings, where we kept suggesting that the prevalent concept of “Eastern Europe” be substituted with “East Central Europe.” We kept discussing the issue with the English, French, and Italian historians. This whole discussion was about our place in Europe. I also remember my uncertainty when working on the book *Europa Słowiańska* about which term to use. In the foreword to the book, written between 1982 and 1983, I made it clear that for me “Slavic Europe” meant its East Central, Eastern and Southeastern parts. In the book *Młodsza Europa*, I defined the territorial core of East-Central Europe as “the areas that are historically connected with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, and the three monarchies that developed from the tenth until the twelfth century.”<sup>121</sup>

*Europa Słowiańska* mostly focused on the time span between the thirteenth and the fifteenth century, which was crucial to the spread of the European spirit over the region. Jenő Szűcs, in his *Three Europes*,<sup>122</sup> also regarded this period as crucial. It was this time when Polish culture became European but at the same time was specifically Polish.

<sup>120</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa: Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w kręgu cywilizacji chrześcijańskiej średniowiecza* [Younger Europe: East Central Europe within medieval Christendom] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1998).

<sup>121</sup> Kłoczowski, *Młodsza Europa*, 11.

<sup>122</sup> Jenő Szűcs, *Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról* [Outline of the three historical regions of Europe] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó Történelmi Szemle, 1981).

This problem had been handled in a different way in the traditional Polish historiography. For example, Joachim Lelewel<sup>123</sup> interpreted Christianization and German colonization in terms of the defeat of the idealized model of a Slavic community. We tried to show how Poland entered the realm of European culture and how it became an integral part. “The ‘long’ thirteenth century was a turning point in the process of the integration of the Polish state. In this century, processes of social and legal integration of the core of the state operation took place, along with the intensification of the Christianization process, which extended over generations. Founding villages and cities on German law implied the reception of the Western model of organization of rural and municipal communities, which practically enjoyed full self-governance, and which were built on the rights granted to them—their liberties. The knights also gained their rights, which opened a path to their transition into nobility. Rights were also granted to the diocesan and monastic clergy. These facts show the rise of a civil society (named *societas civilis* in the historical sources of the epoch)—an assembly of citizens sharing their responsibility for their local communities and their *Heimats*.”<sup>124</sup>

**PK:** *This way of thinking about the medieval history of Poland and the dynamic interaction between Slavic and Latin cultures was further elaborated in the discussion of the Polish humanists in the mid-1980s. They produced the two-volume study entitled The Universalism and the Distinctiveness of Polish Culture.*<sup>125</sup>

**JK:** Cultural universalism and individualism were central premises underlying my research. Today, one of the most topical issues is to perceive the world as a “global village,” but this does not contradict local patriotism. These issues also relate to the problem of cultural distinct-

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<sup>123</sup> Joachim Lelewel (1786–1861), Polish historian, bibliographer, and politician.

<sup>124</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, “Tysiąc lat Polski w Europie” [Poland’s millennium in Europe], in *Przeszłość dla przyszłości: Historycy o Polsce w Europie* [The past for the future: Historians about the role of Poland in Europe], ed. Jerzy Kłoczowski (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2010), 181–203, here 183.

<sup>125</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, ed., *Uniwersalizm i swoistość kultury polskiej* [The universalism and the distinctiveness of Polish culture], 2 vol. (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1989–90).

tiveness. This is why I find infuriating narratives of the sort “either a Pole, or a European.” This is an absurd way to comprehend matters. Poles have always been Europeans. Since the moment when the state of Mieszko I joined Latin-Christian civilization, Polish culture has never fallen outside European culture.

In the paper entitled “Tysiąc lat Polski w Europie,” published in 2010, I discussed this problem once again. I observed that: “In the Western, Latin world, the common language of the state elites led to unity based on culture. Throughout many centuries, society and its rights were in the foreground, along with the deeply reformed Christianity, enriched in strong humanist accents. The elites of this culture promoted a Christian version of the vital motto of liberty, equality, and fraternity of humankind. *The Polish Chronicle* by Master Wincenty (Vincent Kadlubek) remains a valuable testimony of the reception of Christian humanism in Poland, supported by visible influences of antiquity. Polish historiography delves deeper and deeper into this work, dating back to the late twelfth century, and understands it better and better. We need to appreciate the effort to sustain the independence of the medieval Polish state and to realize its ambition to be a monarchy—a Christian republic. The processes taking place at that time were fundamental. We may call them the first stage of Poland’s European integration: a complex process of adapting Western patterns and values in a creative confrontation with local cultures, needs, and the system of political power.”<sup>126</sup>

**PK:** *Immediately after my graduation from the MA course at the Catholic University of Lublin, I was employed in the Institute of East Central Europe, which you were in charge of. The institute was founded in 1991, and its activity was supported by the entire academic community in Lublin. It became a research center, launching numerous projects dealing with international research of the history of East Central Europe. How did the institute come into being?*

**JK:** I have to note first that the idea of the common debate on the history of the countries of East Central Europe was originally put forward

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<sup>126</sup> Kłoczowski, “Tysiąc lat Polski w Europie,” 183.

by Oskar Halecki and Marcelli Handelsman<sup>127</sup> in the interwar period. Until 1939, meetings of historians representing our region were held to provide a forum for open historical debate. One could say that these meetings formed a tradition of close cooperation between historians that was referred to after the war as exemplary. Historians were well aware of the fact that historical research needs to go beyond the ethnocentric approach to the study of the past. This is how the concept of the heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth came into view, and it provided a convenient narrative for seeking mutual understanding. This shared outlook on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was extremely instrumental in encouraging cooperation between historians from the neighboring countries, which was crucial to our research projects concerning East Central Europe, undertaken in the 1990s.

**PK:** *The cooperation of historians from Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine who decided to work out a shared vision of the common past must have been a difficult project—especially at the beginning—as it required that all the participants overcome their mutual mistrust. Yet you succeeded in finding partners in each of the neighboring countries, at a time when the Soviet domination had just ended. It turned out that when looking at the difficult common history, there are more elements that unite us than those that set us apart. This research cooperation gave rise to four synthetic histories of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, each written by historians from these countries, but each discussed and developed at the meetings of all the authors.*

**JK:** This project was our great achievement, even though not everything went the way we planned. Indeed, cooperation was not easy. Our Belarusian colleagues experienced the most serious problems in participating in the project. The last meeting of all the authors took place in the autumn of 1994 in Lublin, where they all gathered for a conference devoted to the Union of Lublin.<sup>128</sup> We managed to solve many prob-

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<sup>127</sup> Marcelli Handelsman (1882–1945), Polish historian.

<sup>128</sup> Jerzy Kłoczowski, Paweł Kras, and Hubert Łaszkiewicz, eds., *Unia lubelska i tradycje integracyjne w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* [The union of Lublin and traditions of integration in Central and Eastern Europe] (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1999).

lems, but then our Belarusian colleagues expressed their unease for our future cooperation, which was due to the political upheaval taking place in Belarus.

**PK:** *You were among historians like Bronisław Geremek, Henryk Samsonowicz, and Janusz Tazbir<sup>129</sup> who realized the uniqueness of Poland being situated between East and West, between two civilizations, with all the related consequences. This situation was an extremely important historical factor, which determined a lot of Poland's successes and failures. You managed to develop a narrative in which Poland's location is a source of success; this is what you imply by the notion of the historical heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In your opinion, this notion had a unifying function despite differences.*

**JK:** The history and the heritage of the First Polish Republic should be a tool of unification rather than division between the nations which grew out of it, and which refer to this state in terms of their heritage. John Paul II was fully aware of this imperative. This is why when communism collapsed, he invited to the Vatican about a hundred intellectuals representing the nations anchored in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to talk about its heritage—the heritage of a multinational federation and an unprecedented event in the history of Europe. I can remember one conference related to this heritage that was held in Budapest in the mid-1990s. All the papers delivered at this conference by researchers from Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine were in Polish, which came as a great surprise to the Hungarian organizers. It was a tangible heritage of the commonwealth, which made the Polish language our shared tool of communication. At the meetings devoted to the history of East Central Europe, one could easily notice that some Czech and Hungarian historians failed to understand the phenomenon of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, reaching so deeply to the eastern parts of Europe. And even today, in the context of the Ukrainian crisis, such historians betray their lack of understanding for the Ukrainian aspirations to independence.

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<sup>129</sup> Janusz Tazbir (1927–2016), Polish historian.

**PK:** *Polish–Russian relations have never been easy, whether in the past or today. As a historian, you tried to build bridges of cooperation with Russian historians and you invited them to the conferences held after 1989, hoping for an open debate on the common—often painful—history. How do you see the results of this cooperation? Have the Russians approved of your view of the historical and cultural distinctiveness of East Central Europe?*

**JK:** I tried to talk about the common, yet often troublesome past with representatives of all the nations concerned, including Russians. I agree with Jerzy Giedroyć's view that history needs to be discussed with all neighbors and no one can be marginalized. This is why we extended our invitation for debate to Germans and Russians. Undeniably, after 1989 it was much easier to talk with the German historians than with our Russian partners. The difficulty of these discussions stems from the fact that our Russian colleagues do not want or just cannot understand the distinct and independent historical heritage of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and they treat the histories of Belarusians and Ukrainians as an integral and inseparable part of the history of Russia. For many of them, Belarusians and Ukrainians are Russians, whereas we see that matter in a different way. This discrepancy manifested itself clearly when we worked on the synthetic *History of East Central Europe*. The Russians tend to diminish the role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which in the fourteenth and fifteenth century covered the vast expanses inhabited by the Orthodox population of the Kiyvan Rus. Lithuania was a natural foe of the Muscovites, who for a long time were just another duchy. Yet when Muscovy did away with the Tatar domination, it started its march to power and developed aspirations to unite all the lands of Rus. Duke Jogailo (Jagiello) made the strategic choice of a Polish partner in 1385, which was a turning point in the history of both nations and of the whole of East Central Europe. The Polish-Lithuanian Jagiellonian federation transformed itself into a republic, while the Jagiellons themselves reached for the thrones in the Czech and Hungarian states in the mid-fifteenth century. This was the birth of Jagiellonian Europe, which was a relatively flexible political construct, and in the history of Czechs and Hungarians was a mere episode before the rise of the Habsburg era. It is a pity

that our southern partners do not cherish the memory of this Jagiellonian period. It ended tragically for both nations. After their defeat in the battle of Mohács, the Hungarians lost most of their territory to the Turks, while the remnants went to the Habsburgs. They were only able to retain a certain degree of autonomy in Transylvania. The Czechs did not suffer that much from the Turks, but they found themselves amidst religious wars, which led to a serious deconstruction of social relations.

**PK:** *Do the problems in talking with the Russian partners relate to the strong links of history with politics? It seems that Russians still tend to use history to legitimize their current political agenda. Historical knowledge seems to be used as an important instrument of the Russian state propaganda, serving to justify its imperial aspirations.*

**JK:** It is quite natural that history is used in Russia for political purposes. Yet this historical narrative, in which the interest of one nation or state becomes a research priority for scholars, then becomes an obstacle to dialogue with other historians. In fact, this is just a continuation of the nineteenth-century Russian model of historical narrative, resulting from the imperial model of historical research. It was in full harmony with the concept that dominated the historical research of that time, which rested on the assumption that the history of Europe was the history of European empires. This model leaves no room for the histories of small or midsize nations. This was a different vision of Europe than the one we were interested in. In our vision, the historical traditions of each nation and community are approached with respect. Only this latter conception of history offers space for Czechs, Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians. This is why the history of Europe written by Le Goff, which I strongly advocate, is at odds with the ethnocentric historiographies of great states, with Russia playing a key role there. Subsequent generations of European historians face the enormous challenge of dealing with European history holistically, so as to discern the diversity of the traditions that compromise it, and to recognize the cultural contributions to that common history made by diverse small communities.

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**PK:** *Your career is a perfect example of how to merge research, teaching, and public service. As a historian, you studied various aspects of the past for professional reasons. At the same time, because of the public functions you performed, you took an active part in making history. First, you were a member of the World War II resistance movement, and then you worked for many years at a Catholic university, which was a rare oasis of free debate in the People's Republic of Poland. You co-founded Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia, and you lectured at Flying Universities.<sup>130</sup> You were involved in the work of the Solidarity<sup>131</sup> movement, and you were a senator of the Republic of Poland. You occupied various important positions in cultural and educational institutions. How did you perceive your engagement in the political activities as a supporter of Solidarity in the 1980s? Along with historians like Karol Modzelewski, Aleksander Gieysztor, and Bronisław Geremek, you were a leading figure in the movement for political transformation. What were the ideas you had in mind at that time?*

**JK:** Many Polish historians got involved in political activities, either during the first Solidarity movement of the years 1980–81, or at the time of the Round Table and the subsequent construction of a new democratic state in the 1990s. It was a natural thing for people who had a Home Army background and who were loyal to the tradition of engagement in the Polish underground state during World War II. We have already mentioned that civil, patriotic education and upbringing were extremely important for my generation. These ideas determined our activity in the resistance movement and in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. My entry into the political arena in the 1980s and 1990s was a continuation of my service to Poland, in harmony with the same ideals that almost half a century ago propelled me to join the Home Army. These ideals found their embodiment in the “Solidarity” movement,

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<sup>130</sup> “Flying Universities” (Polish: *Uniwersytet Latający*): an underground educational enterprise that operated from 1885 to 1905 in Warsaw, revived between 1977 and 1981 in the People's Republic of Poland.

<sup>131</sup> Independent Self-Governing Labor Union “Solidarity” (Polish: *Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy “Solidarność”*): Polish labor union founded 1980; first trade union in a Warsaw Pact country that was not controlled by a communist party.



which was a cross-party organization that consolidated people representing different ideologies and axiologies. This was the source of power of the movement, which made it immune to political conflicts, like the ones occurring later on the Polish political scene. It is part of our Polish national character that in critical moments we can unite despite political contrasts. This was the case in the eighteenth century, when we had to defend the Constitution of May 3, and later, during the nineteenth century uprisings. In addition, at the time of the struggle for a new Polish republic, the two political adversaries—Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski—managed to work together. Facing the loss of independence in 1939, all the Polish political parties got involved into the structures of the underground Polish state.

**PK:** *In the first years of the Third Polish Republic, you became an important figure in the political life of the Lublin region, and outside the region. You were elected chairman of the Civil Committee in the Lublin Region, and nominated judge of the Tribunal of the State. In 1991, you became a senator. One could say that you were among the best-known faces of the Lublin Solidarity.*

**JK:** I joined Solidarity in its early days, yet I had resisted any direct political engagement for a long time. I believed that my role was that of a scholar and that I really had a lot to do. I accepted the position of the chairman of the Civil Committee in the Lublin Region since I interpreted that move in terms of my moral obligation. Later, when Adam Stanowski died, I took his place in the Senate.

**PK:** *You are a historian, but your life story is also evidently about making history. How do you interpret the tasks of a historian in the times of an open society and an information society, where access to information is so easy?*

**JK:** History is about remembering things that are fundamental for the history of humankind. On the one hand, we have to bear in mind the danger of making an instrumental use of history. As historians, we realize the danger very well. Since time immemorial, various rulers used

history for their own purposes, as they were aware of the power of remembering the past. They also had tools to influence an understanding of history in a way that was instrumental for their agendas. An alliance of history and power has never been a good idea. Rulers have always used history in an instrumental way and tried to employ it for their political purposes. Historians have often engaged in disputes about the way to perceive and evaluate the past. It might be a good idea to research comprehensively the methods of constructing history used by the communist regime in Poland. Joseph Stalin was well aware of the importance of a historical narrative for attaining his political objectives. Moscow authorities used various measures to influence the way history was written in each of the countries of the Soviet Bloc. Yet it seems Poles were left more autonomy in that respect. On the other hand, we could also see the cultural revolution that swept throughout Europe, which in the name of liberty rejected the Christian system of values. In the name of unconditional human liberation, people started claiming that belonging to a nation or a religion is a limitation on one's freedom, and so it needs to be rejected. It was decided that history is uninteresting, as it only stores the memories of wars and conflicts, and so it does not help build a new model society. Hence, when entering modernity, one needs to sever one's links to the past and oppose those identities that curtail one's freedom. In my opinion, this is a very dangerous stance, as it also marks an ideological, instrumental use of history. Yet even now history is being repudiated. For example, in some European countries, school classes in history have been discontinued, while in others, history classes have been considerably cut down.

Nevertheless, historical studies went through an important transformation after World War II, and it did not only have to do with the *Annales* school. The transformation consisted of the rise of comparative history that refuted the delimitation of historical research to the confines of just one nation, state, or religion. At the same time, historians highlighted the need to examine history in its global outlook, which cannot only be reduced to the study of a single decisive historical factor—economic or political—as seen in isolation. Under this holistic view, history should help us understand the human being as fully as we can. A historian should try to understand people and societies, taking

into account those factors that were crucial for them. This way of researching history is immune to the attempts of the instrumental use of history, and it creates a forum for an open historical debate. In my view, if contemporary humans reject history, they will pave the way for new totalitarianisms, with figures like Hitler or Stalin who will exploit the power of contemporary media and impose their own vision of today, tomorrow, and yesterday.

Let me give you an example of a critique of the concept of sin that I encountered in one of the journals of the radical supporters of modern society. In their opinion, the concept of sin—shared by the main monotheistic religions—should be eradicated completely from contemporary culture. With the demise of the concept of sin, the sense of guilt will also disappear, which will expand the limits of human freedom. The media wield enormous power in the contemporary world, which may endanger a civilization resting on a traditional system of values. The media exhibit a tendency to simplify their narrative and are not attracted by the complexities of scholarly debate. The media are interested in a brief, simple message that leaves virtually no space for personal reflection. For a person like me, who experienced and remembers very well the twentieth-century totalitarianisms, this is a fundamental issue. We have the right to fear our future in the world, so overwhelmed by electronic media, where it is so easy to invent and promote crazy ideas on a global scale. I am afraid of such uses of media, especially when I think that someone may one day use them to justify a need to eradicate this or that group of people.

**PK:** *As I am listening to you, I am reminded of a relatively old book by Jerzy Topolski entitled 'The World without History'.<sup>132</sup> He wrote about historically distant societies that lived without a memory of the past, but also about more recent experiments to build societies with erased or manipulated historical memory. It seems to me that the contemporary attempts to marginalize history and make it nothing more than a hobby for a small group of enthusiasts of old books are not a serious threat, even though no one can ignore the phenomena that you have mentioned. In the Polish re-*

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<sup>132</sup> Jerzy Topolski, *Świat bez historii* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1976).

*ality, constructing the world without history seems, at least to my generation, out of the question. It is an unimaginable utopia. It is true, however, that more and more people are anxious about reducing the number of hours of teaching history in primary and secondary schools and about the decreasing interest of the youth in historical topics and studies. It will lead or has already led to the considerable worsening of the general public historical culture. As borne out by opinion polls, more and more young people cannot say anything about the Battle of Grunwald, or they find it difficult to relate the word Katyń to anything they know.*

**JK:** I have observed this trend in Poland, and I find it troubling. I believe that the premise, according to which the building of a modern society requires that we ignore history, is a myth. I disagree with anyone who says that history is boring and useless, and that there is not much sense in burdening your brain with the knowledge of some battles in the past, which have nothing to do with your life. Why should we be at all interested in past societies, which are so distinct from us in their style of living? There are opinions that historical knowledge is useless to contemporary humankind. Instead of delving into the past, it can be more beneficial for individuals and societies to focus on designing and using technological devices. Despite new programs of teaching history, there is this widespread opinion that history is a collection of dates, names and events. History—as we understand it—is a wide comparative analysis, a global investigation of the past in order to get to know and understand the human being of yesterday. At the same time, history is an indispensable key to understanding contemporary society and culture. We are well aware of the fact that many ground-breaking observations were made through the research into religious societies, observed in the *longue durée* perspective. We are able to see how much the approach to the history of Christianity has changed since we ceased writing the biographies of popes and bishops, but we began to focus on larger communities. The definition of the Church worked out by the Second Vatican Council, which states that the Church is God's people on the way opposed the traditional study of Christianity and it was very helpful for us. This is because we are interested in society and the people that compose it. And this is a completely different concept of history.

**PK:** *Recently, you gave a lecture for students of history at KUL about the profession of a historian in the twenty-first century. You tried to convince those young people, who often are in doubt, that it is worthwhile to be a historian and that historical research can be a pleasurable activity, and it can also facilitate navigating the contemporary world. One of the students asked you a question, which I personally find vital and universal: Are historical academic studies needed any longer? Does it at all make sense to train historians?*

**JK:** There can hardly be any doubt that historical academic studies are needed. Of course, the university is undergoing a kind of crisis, along with the educational formats it uses—which is perhaps more evident in Europe than in North America. I have a feeling that this neglectful attitude towards studying history is caused by the expansion of the media culture, which evokes a false image of everything having been already discovered and every type of information always being within reach. It may well be the case that humanists should be more intensely engaged in the world of contemporary media, which are so influential among the youth. I think that universities have neglected this aspect. I recall the early days of the radio in my family house in Bogdany. The installation of the first radio antenna was an extraordinary event in the life of the whole local community. The technological advances that took place in the realm of the means of communication are revolutionary, and one needs to reckon with this fact. Yet to believe that it is easy to get access to objective historical facts is another story. Studying history in an academic environment fosters analytical thinking and equips us with the skills of critical analysis of all bits of information that come to us. It teaches us to check the source, to verify its reliability and so on. We should use exactly the same approach to the information that reaches us through the media. The electronic media are abundant with “ready-made knowledge” that can be downloaded and used. There is no space for controversy or questions. Nonetheless, the ability to ask questions and to seek answers is indispensable for the humanities. Historical studies have always taught and should always teach how to engage in argument-based debates. Historians work with a variety of sources, and they need to con-

front them in order to reach particular conclusions. European rationalism occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the emerging university culture. Do we wish to undermine it and step back to primitive forms of human interaction?

**PK:** *Thus, do you think that, in education, it is still vital to protect the particular link that connects the student and the teacher, the master and the apprentice? When talking about your academic masters, Kazimierz Tymieniecki and Karol Górski, you were so grateful and kindhearted. You said how much you owe them in terms of interests and the research workshop, and how grateful you were for the special care you felt at different stages of your historical education. Is this relation still vital in the contemporary educational process?*

**JK:** Yes, it is certainly vital. There is a need for an exemplary university master, teacher, priest, or politician. In an interview published in 1999, I emphasized the importance of this relationship. I said: “The rule that the teacher is decisive for the formation of a young man is valid since childhood. The core element here is the human being. Computers and other technical devices are vital as long as they serve the human, and yet they always remain inanimate objects only. There is an observable danger behind the tendencies to oversimplify the role of the university and the school, which is a generally dehumanizing tendency. This is why I am so anxious to protect the ideas I find fundamental. Present-day historians enjoy marvelous technical conveniences, but they must stay historians—human beings with minds, ways of thinking, and personalities. Without the human element, technology is unhelpful and disempowers humankind.”<sup>133</sup> A good master should know how to attract students to a given research domain. It is the master who should teach how to think and understand the world.

**PK:** *Recently, there have been proposals to construct “new humanities,” which seem to ignore the student-master relationship. Instead, technical*

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<sup>133</sup> Henryk Gapski, “Historyk wobec siebie i przeszłości: Rozmowy z Jerzym Kłoczowskim” [A historian towards himself and the past: Conversations with Jerzy Kłoczowski], in *Historiae peritus*, 102.

*proficiency in the use of computer applications is promoted, which opens the world of enormous amounts of data and teaches how to use them.*

**JK:** Technical devices do improve our workshop. They do provide us with access to information to the degree which we could not have even imagined before. Yet they are unable to substitute the human being. They do not get rid of the process of thinking typical of a humanist. If, being historians, we want to understand historical human beings, we must see them in all the richness of their thought and action. We must do our best to understand the motives behind their actions, to get to know their mentality, irrespective of whether we mean religious reformers or executioners in death camps.

**PK:** *You belong to the generation of historians who, in their research on the comparative social and religious history of Europe, challenged various myths and stereotypes, deeply influencing the way of interpreting the histories of nations, social groups, and institutions. Largely, your efforts have been successful. Indeed, the way we see the histories of our neighbors changed, and we managed to narrow down xenophobic attitudes. A lot of myths and false ideas, which served the instrumental use of history in the relatively recent past, have been undermined. Everyone who attended history classes in the time of the Polish People's Republic can remember that Polish-German relations were depicted in a very negative way, while the historical links of Poland with Russia and the Soviet Union were presented as far warmer than they really were. Now, when many of these politically and ideologically exploited myths have been successfully repudiated, can you see a danger of new myths of this kind occurring? How do you think we should write a history of Europe to avoid making it trivial, on the one hand, and to refrain from imposing particular interpretative paradigms, on the other?*

**JK:** This is a crucial, yet extremely difficult task. Let me illustrate the difficulty by referring to a book written by the well-known British historian Eric Hobsbawm, where he presents his own vision of European history. What is the vision like? In a nutshell, after the fall of Rome, Europe was dominated by anarchy, and so nothing worthy of historical



## Times of Upheaval

research occurred at that time. The eighteenth century witnessed the birth of five empires, which, according to Hobsbawm, gave rise to Europe. The most important of these was the tsarist Russian empire. These five empires existed for two subsequent centuries, and they completely occupied the European political and cultural space. In the twentieth century the Soviet Union arose, which was a crucial political formation. Thanks to Stalin, the Soviet Union was modernized, and in this way the state managed to defeat Nazi Germany, which was the most significant contribution of the Soviets to the history of Europe. Hobsbawm interprets the collapse of the Soviet Union as most unfortunate, since it was the last of the grand European empires. The European Union offers no chance of building a united Europe, claims Hobsbawm. This is more or less the vision of European history that identifies solely the role of huge empires. No smaller states play any role in this history. What is thought provoking is that Hobsbawm ignores a rich historiographic tradition concerning the history of Europe.

**PK:** *As you have presented so broadly the role of mass media in contemporary world, I would like to ask you about the future of scholarly debate in the form we know it from universities and conferences. Each academic discipline develops through debate, which consists in exchange of arguments and the constant verification of the theses posed by researchers. Studying history requires reaching conclusions after a critical analysis of sources, through a painstaking effort to examine the literature of the subject, in full harmony with the principle sine ira et studio. Is science—understood as scholarly discussion—doomed to decline in a world overwhelmed by fast and short messaging, where the exchange of arguments takes too long for interlocutors to afford it, and where a good bon mot is worth more than scrutiny?*

**JK:** This is far greater a problem that concerns not only history but also the whole of contemporary culture, including political culture. Dialogue is necessary in science and in public life. People need to communicate, and dialogue calls for the ability to listen and talk. Let me observe that debate is a concept that can be traced back to the university and the scholastic tradition, which taught the rules for reaching cer-



tain truths through an analysis of arguments for and against. Abelard taught this method in the mid-twelfth century. These rules of debate and negotiating the truth underlie the European intellectual culture, which was born at the university, and which permeated various spheres of social life. Now, we can observe a crisis of political debate. We see how politicians are unable to talk to one another and how they are unable to negotiate their arguments.

**PK:** *You feel Polish and European. You travelled around the world a lot, you lectured at foreign universities, and you published in various languages on the history and culture of Poland and Europe. We Poles often have problems with our attitude to our own past. Polish public debate in recent years has revealed that Poles tend to be ashamed of their history. Of course, I do not mean Polish historians or the cultural elite. I mean the public. Sometimes it is claimed that we have historical complexes, especially about the shameful moments in our past. Do you recognize this problem? Do you think that this shame could result from the low historical culture in our society?*

**JK:** I repeatedly encountered this problem when abroad. I often met Poles who were virtually unable to say anything about Polish history, yet they had complexes about the Polish past in relation towards other nations. I was surprised to find this, as I spoke about the history of Poland in many venues. I warned against idealizing one's history, and against the refusal to understand the history of others. I remember an Italian television channel asking me about Karol Wojtyła, who liked meeting diverse people and was able to seek and find common language with them. I said that Poles should not be idealized, and I emphasized that the attitude of openness, tolerance, and respect towards people who represented different views had always been a crucial value in the Polish historical tradition. I added that Wojtyła was brought up in this tradition. I said that the key to understanding the Polish pope lies in the noblest values of humankind as well as in his openness to others. My answer impressed the journalists very much.

Let me offer another example. Let us ask in which European country the public attitude towards the two totalitarianisms looked like

that in Poland. Which other nation decided for a simultaneous and relentless fight against the two enemies? The French historical discourse is still divided on the judgment on Vichy France. We do not have this kind of problem. I think we can be proud of our attitude during World War II and during the time of the communist totalitarian regime after 1944. The war affected us very badly, but the “humanity” of Polish culture saved us from the barbaric totalitarianisms, from the evil induced not so much by the Germans or Russians, but by the barbarians, completely depraved by Nazism and Bolshevik Communism.

**PK:** *To round up our conversation, I would like to quote the words you wrote in 2010, which are an appeal from a historical witness and a researcher of history who is fully aware of all the bright and dark sides of European history. This is an appeal addressed to Poles, and to all Europeans, to respect the past and take care of the roots of European culture. This is what you wrote: “Protecting the fundamental values of European culture—manifesting itself in local, social, and national dimensions, and characterized by its humanist and respectful attitude towards other human beings—is a matter of vital concern. People representing my generation—witnesses of the atrocities of World War II and the barbaric totalitarianisms—are able to discern clearly the opportunities created by unifying Europe. Nonetheless, they also warn against a European utopia, which is expected to give us all that we want, without our commitment and hard work. What is needed is the sense of civic responsibility of a Pole (a German and a French person as well)—a European. Keeping in mind the atrocities that Europe experienced in the twentieth century, we wish to sensitize future generations to resist any hint of a totalitarian utopia, of promises or actions that end in new waves of enslavement. Thus, let us use the Polish and other historical memories—the Jewish in particular—as inspiration for reflection by the next generation of Europeans.”*<sup>134</sup>

**JK:** I definitely maintain this appeal.

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<sup>134</sup> Kłoczowski, “Tysiąc lat Polski w Europie,” 203.

# Introducing

## János M. Bak

When my dear colleague János Bak turned seventy—almost two decades ago—I had the honorable duty to introduce his Festschrift. The book bore the colorful and rich imprint of the multitude of inspirations, interests, and initiatives that originated from him and flowed into the work of his friends, colleagues, and students, and had the felicitous title: *The Man of Many Devices, Who Wandered Full Many Ways*. In the introduction I apologized that, having known him then only for about two decades, “by no means would I attempt to write a biography. To those who are interested I would recommend the film made about him by his daughter Gamma (who, herself had a hard task providing an overall picture).” Now we can rather speak of four decades, and the biography is told here by the most authentic source: János Bak himself. *Quid plura?* What more is there to be said? Maybe just a brief “trailer.”

The life of János Bak was touched by the dramatic turning points of the past seventy years: Growing up as an assimilated Jew in the climate of aggravating anti-Semitism of pre-World War II Hungary, hiding, tricking, saving his life in Holocaust-era Budapest, becoming an enthusiastic young communist activist in 1945, he became disillusioned and was phased out after the real communist takeover in 1948. In those times, he became a student of history, and he had an interesting insight into the survival and gradual demise of the old, prewar authorities of historical craft and the self-assertion of a new, Marxist, communist class of historians. Before engaging himself in a specific territory of historical research, history swept away everything: He became an ambitious young activist in the reform process leading to the

revolution of 1956, and he was a busy participant in the turmoil of the days of the revolution.

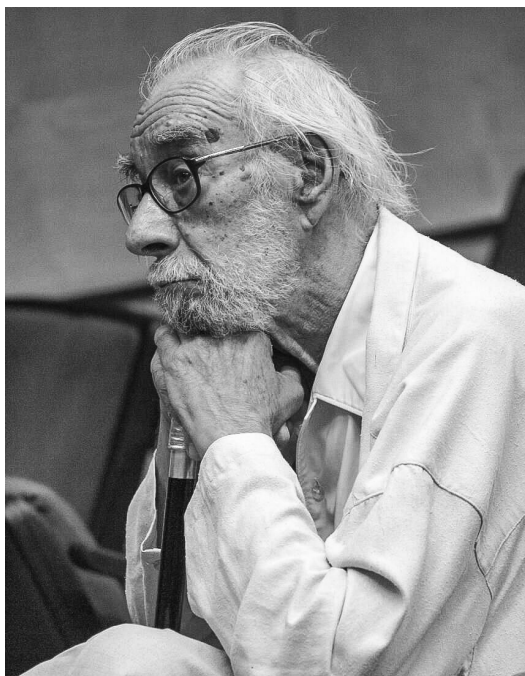
This was followed by a long period of three and a half decades in exile—first in Germany, then in England, and finally in Canada. While participating for a few years as an external member of the Brussels-based Imre Nagy Institute for Political Science, representing the cause of the 1956 revolution for the world, he went back to university in Göttingen, and as a student of Percy Ernst Schramm he became a medievalist. At the same time, he had a job as a sailor on the Hamburg-Chicago Line, which helped him to get a German passport. He then defended his PhD on medieval kingship, and he obtained a scholarship for two years to do research in Oxford. Finally, he got a position in Marburg, not in medieval but modern East European history; yet he also got into the circle of German medievalists, the *Konstanzer Arbeitskreis*. Dissatisfied with the rigid internal climate of that milieu, he finally decided to leave Germany, moved overseas, and ended up around 1968 as professor of medieval studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

He could witness there the eruption of student movements and the evolution of the colorful youth counterculture on this far-western campus, while doing his best to strengthen the positions of classical and medieval European culture in this remote land, which once belonged to the Kwakiutl Indians. While getting involved into the dynamic networks and projects of American medievalists and initiating his own projects, during the 1970s he was again becoming more and more involved with Central and Eastern Europe, his broader homeland. He regularly visited colleagues in all these countries, carrying books, reviews, photocopies, and precious conference invitations not only to Budapest but also to Prague (where the situation was especially acute), East Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow. And, as much as an already stigmatized 1956 émigré could do, he also got involved with the various efforts of the democratic opposition towards making the Iron Curtain more and more porous and transparent. From a scholarly point of view, his support went as far as translating and editing the work of fellow medievalists, such as the Russian Aron Y. Gurevich and the Hungarian Erik Fügedi. In the 1980s, he founded an international society for

the study of kingship, called *Maiestas*, where both leading scholars from the West—such as Jacques Le Goff, Ralph Giesey, Janet Nelson, and Reinhard Elze—and those from the East and the North—such as Aleksander Gieysztor, Erik Fügedi, and Sverre Bagge—could take part at conferences in Toronto or Paris.

Then came 1989, his participation in the foundation and work of the Historical Institute for the 1956 Revolution, and our common enterprise—the building up of a Medieval Studies Department at the Central European University. We gained a huge benefit from his broad range of international contacts and his enthusiasm to engage in the experience of working with an international group of students on a new kind of interdisciplinary education in medieval studies. The task was ambitious: We had to design a graduate, MA and PhD curriculum, using all his university experiences from Germany, England, and America, and all his emotional—though sometimes angry and dissatisfied—attraction to the unexploited treasures of East European scholarship. This also meant the establishment of a meeting place for professors and students from the East and West, making Budapest the center of the world. Working in a close, multinational community of scholars and students makes university planning a demanding, fascinating, and passionate enterprise—this is what János has stood for during the past twenty-five years of common work. Without his energy, skill, and experience, this department would not have become what it is.

Besides his teaching activities, which resulted in these decades in the formation of a dedicated group of talented disciples around him, and besides his tireless organizational work (he was also head of the department for a time, and he continuously invested enormous efforts in shaping, describing, and reforming our programs), he was the most active in initiating collaborative research groups, involving now also his students. To mention just a few of his initiatives: research on the comparative history of Central European nobilities; a continuation of his project already begun in Canada, a bilingual edition of *Decreta regni Hungariae*; a bilingual source series on *Central European Medieval Texts*; renewed, ever more ample versions of a handbook on medieval narrative sources; a broad-based cooperation for preparing an *Encyclo-*



J á n o s M. B a k  
(Photo: Courtesy of János M. Bak)

*paedia of Medieval Central Europe*; and the building of the Medieval Central European Research Network (MECERN). Needless to add: All these projects were not only shaped and moved by his dedicated investment but also nourished by his own research, his studies on nobility, kingship, symbology, historical regions, and historical forgeries.

From our long biographic conversation, recorded in 2014, the readers can get an insight into the fascinating subjective experience, the emotionally colored, savory, and critical viewpoints of this impressive life trajectory, and an overview of his achievements.

*Gábor Klaniczay*

# János M. Bak

## in Conversation with Gábor Klaniczay

**GÁBOR KLANICZAY (GK):** *János, you are 85 now, beyond a few nice anniversary celebrations. It might be a good time to look back upon those eight and a half decades and to talk about how your life took different turns in the troubled twentieth century, and how you became a historian, mostly, but not exclusively a medievalist in Hungary, Central Europe, but also in broader Europe and North America.*

**JÁNOS M. BAK (JMB):** Before we start, I would like to begin with a statement: the fact that I am sitting here and talking to you in a way representing Hungarian medievalists of my generation is the consequence of a sequence of tragic events. The person who should represent this generation is Jenő Szűcs,<sup>1</sup> who has been dead now for a quarter of a century. But even my other good friend and university classmate András Kubinyi,<sup>2</sup> who only died just a few years ago, would also represent it better than I; to say nothing of younger friends and colleagues like Pál Engel<sup>3</sup> or Ferenc Szakály,<sup>4</sup> or even the prolific Gyula Kristó.<sup>5</sup> Thus, I became as good as the “doyen of Hungarian medievalists”—as I was recently called—*malgré moi*.

**GK:** *Having said this, we can say that there is a generation of medievalists to which you belong, and this is a very good opportunity to talk about this generation as well and you as a representative among others.*

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1 Jenő Szűcs (1928–88), historian.

2 András Kubinyi (1929–2007), historian, archaeologist.

3 Pál Engel (1938–2001), historian.

4 Ferenc Szakály (1942–99), historian.

5 Gyula Kristó (1939–2004), historian.

**JMB:** Yes, the problem is that I represent it very poorly because I spent most of my professional life outside of the country and certainly outside of the medievalists' historical establishment—the Historical Institute of the Academy, Budapest University (ELTE), or even Szeged University. So in that sense it is a “maverick” story of someone who marginally belonged and kept an eye on what was going on in Hungarian medieval scholarship but was doing very little about it or participating in it. Moreover, I fit into this book poorly insofar as the other historians included in it have presented major and innovative works on the medieval history of their countries and beyond, while I have produced only minor contributions. I am much more a teacher than a researcher and writer of medieval history. I am proud of having received an award of the Medieval Academy of America for teaching medieval studies in 2007.

**GK:** *We will get to that later when talking about your professional career.*

**JMB:** Alright, let us start with my biography. I was born here in Budapest and grew up just a few blocks from where we are now talking, in the so called New Leopold Town, or Újlipótváros. The district developed in the 1910s and 20s and was inhabited to a great extent by families of the professional middle class, a good part of them of Jewish background—assimilated Jews. I come from a family of the professional middle class, but not academics. My father, Lóránt Bak,<sup>6</sup> held a doctorate in economics from Leipzig; he would have liked to become a social scientist, but then the family convinced him to take a “decent job,” so he became a clerk in a textile factory of which he was the Prokurist, that is the senior manager, at the time of my youth. He still wrote a few reviews for the journal *Századunk* (Our Century), founded around 1900 by Oscar Jászi<sup>7</sup> and Ervin Szabó,<sup>8</sup> and edited in the interwar years by Imre Csécsy.<sup>9</sup> Still, his library was more literary than one of a social scientist: all the German classics, much French and

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6 Lóránt Bak (1903–75), economist.

7 Oscar Jászi (1875–1957), writer, historian.

8 Ervin Szabó (1877–1918), social scientist, librarian.

9 Imre Csécsy (1893–1961), writer, editor, MP.



English, and, of course, a nice collection of modern Hungarian first editions. I read the great Russians in German translation, maybe most of the French as well.

**GK:** *Where did your family come from?*

**JMB:** The Bak family lived in Upper Hungary (today's Slovakia). Some ancestors were charged with church theft in an anti-Semitic "show trial" in the late eighteenth century and executed. Their children were given the honorary epithet "Bne kadosh" (sons of the holy), which, abbreviated as B-K came to be Bak, an otherwise common Hungarian name. Great-grandfather Israel was teacher of religion in Budapest; grandfather Soma rose from estate manager to CEO of an agro-industrial company that produced the first deep-frozen vegetables in Hungary. His wife, Irén (née Brück), came from a Vienna-Budapest doctors' family.

My mother, Ilona Bús, was even less of an academic: she was trained as a postmistress and came from the countryside to Budapest just after World War I to be a poet and a writer. And she remained a more or less successful writer, with a bad and deservedly forgotten novel but three fairly nice volumes of poetry. She also wrote feuilletons in both liberal and Social Democratic dailies.

As far as I know—and that is not much, as I only visited Nagykálló<sup>10</sup> a few times as a child—mother's family adhered to the religious prescriptions, but the Budapest grandparents had only a formal contact with the Jewish community. My father had none, and I was not even circumcised and registered in the religious community. We always had a Christmas tree and holiday, even if without a crib and Baby Jesus. However, during the years of persecution many of us took our Jewishness a bit more seriously: "If anyhow... then why not." I, for example, asked to be prepared for the bar mitzvah ceremony and enjoyed reciting the words of Prophet Amos: "Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?" (9:7). I liked these "words of

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<sup>10</sup> Nagykálló was the birthplace of János Bak's mother, in eastern Hungary. Her family lived there and was taken from there to Auschwitz.

God” in contrast to the haughtiness of Jews believing to be the chosen people above all others. Grandpa must have donated quite a sum to charity for my being allowed to play this game without being inscribed into the community. But it was just a brief excursion into “religion.”

**GK:** *What was the Budapest milieu your family lived in?*

**JMB:** Overall, it was an intellectual family. Both my parents had friends among well-known personalities—my mother mainly among the poets, particularly the socialist poets, including Attila József,<sup>11</sup> with whom she lived in the same house for a while on Korong Street in Budapest.

**GK:** *Indeed? That is really a prominent friend to have.*

**JMB:** They lived in the house of Gitta Gyenes,<sup>12</sup> whose daughter Luca is the person who appears in Attila’s poetry: “Szerettem Lucámat, de Lucám nem szeretett”<sup>13</sup> (I loved my Luca, but my Luca did not love me). But my mother was also friends with several other, mainly socialist, writers and poets. My father in turn had friends among the writers and art historians. I think he was somehow classmate of Antal Szerb,<sup>14</sup> and they had their common friends: art historians, publishers, painters, and others. All of these were regular guests at our house, including the man who was friends with all the Budapest intellectuals: François Gachot,<sup>15</sup> the cultural attaché of the French Embassy whom I, as a kid, entertained with my miming French—as I had heard it on the radio. Once, for a moment, he thought that I indeed knew French and asked: “Comment? Je ne comprends pas.” (What? I do not understand). Great laughter. So in that sense I grew up in enlightened surroundings, with a big library that filled several walls of the flat here on Tátra Street.

We lived in a rather comfortable “three-bedroom flat”—as you would call it in English—on the fifth floor of a modern building;

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<sup>11</sup> Attila József (1905–37), poet.

<sup>12</sup> Gitta Gyenes (1888–1960), painter.

<sup>13</sup> Attila József, “Nemzett József Áron” (1928).

<sup>14</sup> Antal Szerb (1901–45), literary historian, novelist.

<sup>15</sup> François Gachot (1901–86), diplomat, writer.

I had my own nursery room with a balcony. I think I shared that with the nannies and then the German *fräuleins* who were taking care of me until my seventh, maybe even eighth year of age. I never went to something like a kindergarten; that does not seem to have been usual in our circles. With the *fräuleins* we were walking around or playing, went to the swimming pools or to Margaret Island. One of my classmates summarized that youth of ours by saying that the only difference among us was that some of us went to the Lukács swimming pool, others to the Palatinus open-air spa; some went ice-skating on Honvéd Street, others at the Pozsonyi Street. Some were Boy Scouts, and some were not. I became a Boy Scout relatively soon, in the middle of the war. I enjoyed that very much, and it was a very important experience for me in the 1940s. And I went to elementary school here on Szemere Street.

**GK:** *What a coincidence! I went to the same elementary school.*

**JMB:** I am not surprised. Most of my friends went to school either on Sziget Street or Szemere Street, having lived in the neighborhood. I walked there with my father, whose office was a little bit further south in the city center. And then the *gimnázium*,<sup>16</sup> the Berzsényi Dániel Gimnázium,<sup>17</sup> was on our way, too, so for some twelve years—with interruptions—we walked more or less the same route.

I have no particular memories of elementary school save having a very charming teacher in second and third grade, Miss Málcsi, whose favorite I was and from whom I may have started to learn teaching methods. I had several others who taught me how to teach. I did not learn the trade of a historian very much at school or university, but I learned how to teach—and how not to teach—and I think I learned it well.

I began secondary school in 1939, a few days after the beginning of World War II. Actually, we came back from a holiday in Opatija and

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<sup>16</sup> In the interwar Hungarian school system pupils could, after four years of elementary school, choose between the more prestigious eight-year gymnasium and the more practically oriented four-year high school.

<sup>17</sup> Budapest V. kerületi magyar királyi Berzsényi Dániel gimnázium (Hungarian Royal Dániel Berzsényi Grammar School).

Venice on the very day the war broke out. The class in which I started was a segregated one for those whose civil records showed that they were of the Israelite religion. It was not yet a Nuremberg-type racial definition of “Jews” but “Israelites.” In 1939, there was an extension of the *numerus clausus*—which had already had decades of history in Hungary—according to which those belonging to the Israelite religion were admitted in small numbers to gymnasiums or special classes that were organized for them. There were such classes in three Budapest gymnasiums, and the Berzsenyi was one of them.

**GK:** *Was it exclusively a segregated class for Israelites?*

**JMB:** Only Israelites. We had of course a good number of so-called “Jewish” friends in the other class who had been baptized, some by conviction, some by hoping to avoid persecution, which, however, they did not. I have to add that, in my recollection of this class, we did not experience explicit discrimination in school. We had the very same first class teachers; in no way did we feel like being in a second-class group. During the war, when there was shortage of fuel and some classes were taught in the afternoon—which was not usual in Hungarian gymnasiums—and our class was regularly put to the afternoon, I once speculated whether or not this was anti-Semitism. I doubt that it was. I think it just got across that way.

The Berzsenyi was an excellent school. I loved to go there. And the teachers were first class. A good number of them held positions as habilitated doctors (*Privatdozenten*) at the university. The level of instruction in most of those years was excellent, even if some of the professors were not exactly interesting figures.

**GK:** *Who and what had the greatest impact upon you?*

**JMB:** I learned two things there. First, I learned good Latin from no one less than István Borzsák,<sup>18</sup> who then had been head of the Classics Department of Budapest University for many years. He was replaced

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<sup>18</sup> István Borzsák (1914–2007), classical philologist.

when he was regularly being called up by the army during the war by the very strange maverick Sándor Égner from Maramureş,<sup>19</sup> who was a chartered court translator in twelve languages, Latin among them. In the last years of my studies, again when Borzsák must have been on the front, it was Tibor Kardos,<sup>20</sup> the Renaissance scholar and Italianist from whom we learned Latin with Italian pronunciation.

**GK:** *Was that still at the gymnasium?*

**JMB:** Yes, I think; Kardos was restricted in his employment, having been classified a half-Jew or something similar, and was happy to have a post at the gymnasium. He was an associate professor at the university and became professor only in 1950. We had him, I think, only for a year, maybe in 1943. Of course, during the open Nazi terror from March 1944 until the liberation we did not go to school at all.

The second thing I learned is how to be a good teacher. That I learned partially from Borzsák but rather more from our teacher of literature for almost eight years, László Vajthó,<sup>21</sup> who in that kind of stiff Prussian gymnasium managed to involve the students and share with them his private views about literature, instead of teaching just what was in the textbooks. “You can read the textbook,” he said, but taught us his own views about literature. He liked to make judgments and proposed “deals.” One of his favorite deals referred to an early nineteenth-century heroic poem, *The Flight of Zalán*, about which I wrote something recently.<sup>22</sup> It is quite boring, very nicely written in hexameter, and Vajthó’s deal was that “we trade the entire *Flight of Zalán* for its first forty-four lines.” These lines are indeed classically beautiful; I know them still by heart and mostly use them

19 The area Maramureş, at the foot of the Carpathian Mts. (now Romania) was a multi-ethnic region with a sizeable Orthodox Jewish population.

20 Tibor Kardos (1908–73), literary historian.

21 László Vajthó (1887–1977), literary historian.

22 Mihály Vörösmarty, “Zalán futása” [Zalán’s flight] (1825). Referred to here, János M. Bak, “From the Anonymus *Gesta* to the *Flight of Zalán* by Vörösmarty”, in *Manufacturing a Past for the Present: Forgery and Authenticity in Medievalist texts and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. János M. Bak, Gábor Klaniczay, and Patrick Geary, National cultivation of culture 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 96–106.

for counting swimming time. Vajthó said: “Look, you have to read that—it belongs to the canon—but in your heart you only have to remember the first forty-four lines,” which I did. And so much more. His prejudice against modern literature just made it more interesting for us. He would often tell us, “While you like all these kinds of young people—Tóth<sup>23</sup> and József and so on—I’ll remain with Reviczky,”<sup>24</sup> and then declaim *The Death of Pan* for a quarter of an hour enthusiastically. Enthusiasm for the subject—that is what he was able to teach, and I think that is what I tried to imitate in the following fifty odd years I have spent in the trade.

**GK:** *How about the other teachers?*

**JMB:** I do not remember much of them. The teachers of sciences whose subjects I merely survived I tend to forget, except one of the math profs who came to teach at the Technical University. But sure, all of them were competent.

I know only of one who was a card-carrying Nazi. Most of them were just part of the establishment, Horthyites;<sup>25</sup> two or three with the predicate “*vitéz*” (hero) that was given them by the regent. Then there were very decent younger people. I always wish to remember the son of one of these *vitéz*-gentlemen, Gyula Horváth, who was teacher of physical education and also commander of the paramilitary Levente-troop.<sup>26</sup> Horváth sent me, as I was a kind of scribe of the class, to purchase a number of Levente identity cards in some kind of government shop. I could then stamp them with “bearer has four Christian grandparents”—by that time the definition of an Aryan—and put on a photograph, a name, and whatever was needed for its validity. They proved to be excellent forged ID cards during the Nazi times.

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<sup>23</sup> Árpád Tóth (1886–1928), poet.

<sup>24</sup> Gyula Reviczky (1855–89), poet.

<sup>25</sup> Supporters of Miklós Horthy (1868–1957), regent of the Kingdom of Hungary 1920–44.

<sup>26</sup> *Levente* was an obligatory paramilitary “movement” founded in 1921. In 1939, participation became mandatory for high school pupils as well. Jews were somehow second-class members, a kind of auxiliaries, but had to attend the training, just as all young people between the age of twelve and twenty-one.

**GK:** *Did you have a personal experience of that?*

**JMB:** Yes, in January 1945, in the last weeks of the siege of Budapest. I was living in an air raid shelter around the corner from here on the Budapest Ringstrasse.

**GK:** *Were you hiding?*

**JMB:** Yes, I was hiding there. A Hungarian Arrow Cross patrol<sup>27</sup> came and asked for the identity cards of everybody, and then the commander held my card in his hand and said: "Now, brethren, come here!" I thought: "Ay, ay, there is some trouble coming." But then he said: "That's the kind of ID card you have to accept! That's the one young people have to have!" So these cards have been really helpful. Several of my friends got one of them, and I may add that this was the sum total of my connection to the so-called "Resistance" movement, where some of my Levente IDs ended up.

**GK:** *Were you the person to distribute these cards?*

**JMB:** Yes, they got into the hands of at least ten or fifteen friends—or even more, as I passed them on to others. Gyula Horváth of course knew very well what I did and closed an eye.

**GK:** *It saved your lives.*

**JMB:** In that moment, indeed, it saved my life. But let us still return for a moment to the gymnasium years. For me, in those years, the Boy Scouts and scouting was the most important experience. I was a member of the 311th Vörösmarty Boy Scout troop, which was a Jewish one and was supported by the Buda Israelite Community. But it was not religious in any form or shape. It had very fine and famous officers. My immediate commander was a young, very promising psychologist, Dé-

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<sup>27</sup> The Arrow Cross (*nyilasok*) were Hungarian National Socialists, who came to power after October 15, 1944; see below.

nes Tamás,<sup>28</sup> son of the owner of a leading Budapest art gallery, Henrik. The Tamás Gallery was the place where modern artists were first shown, among them Csontváry<sup>29</sup>—they also owned a number of his pictures. And the commander of the troop in the 1940s was Miklós Szabolcsi,<sup>30</sup> a literary scholar and the nephew of the famous musical scholar Bence Szabolcsi.<sup>31</sup>

That Boy Scout group was great company. We enjoyed it enormously, and I am just preparing to speak a few words the day after tomorrow at the commemoration of its ninetieth year of foundation. It was accredited by the Hungarian Boy Scouts Association in 1924. The 311th Vörösmarty was an island of peace in the middle of this blood-thirsty world. The commanders managed to let us teenagers live the life of boys and girls while around them the world was collapsing and their fathers were dragged into labor camps, to the Russian front, or God knows where.

Naturally the troop was excluded from the Hungarian Boy Scouts Association by 1940, when they changed the fourth law of the Boy Scouts from “the Boy Scout regards every Boy Scout as his brother,” to “the Boy Scout regards every *Christian* Boy Scout as his brother.” It was very much in contrast to the formulation at the big 1933 Jamboree in Hungary. I have a copy of the formulation of the Boy Scout law from that time, where it is even spelled out that the Boy Scout regards all Scouts “regardless of nation, religion, race” and so on as his brother. By the way, the Boy Scout Association fell under the spell of the official Levente Movement and became militarized, and some of the seriously Christian troops left; I believe, among them the very prestigious Regnum Marianum Boy Scout troop. So we were excluded and were not permitted to wear our funny hats and whatever else belonged to the Boy Scout uniform. But somehow, we did not let ourselves be excluded. We were singing the same Hungarian folksongs and the rather stupid, quite nationalist Boy Scouts’ hymn about recovering the mountains of the Carpathians or something like that.

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28 Dénes Tamás (1925?–45), psychiatry doctorandus.

29 Tivadar Csontváry-Kosztka (1853–1919), painter.

30 Miklós Szabolcsi (1921–2000), literary historian

31 Bence Szabolcsi (1899–1973), historian of music and art.



At this time, much of what was happening in the Third Reich and its occupied territories was not unknown, but we knew very little about it. Still, in a way we followed the Boy Scout slogan of “Be prepared!” Our leaders did prepare these young people for any kind of difficulties by teaching them how to stand up to long hikes and hard sports and so on; and in the very end, one may say, even by actual political preparation for what may come. It was usual at every camp to play what may be called a “practical joke”: some trick played by the senior Scouts on the younger ones called “*hékli*,” from German “*bäkeln*” (to tease, to chaff). In one of the winter camps of ours, the *hékli* was that in the middle of the night one of the rover scouts appeared and said that the gendarmes of Pest County (or the *Volksbundists* from the village of Pomáz?) were about to attack us, since we were seen as “illegal Scouts.” We had to cross over to Esztergom County, where the chief officer was not a Nazi. That meant to go up and down the highest part of Pilis Mountain between midnight and maybe six o’clock in the morning, full dressed—I do not remember whether with the heavy wooden skis or without them. Only when we arrived somewhere between Dömös and Esztergom, in a tavern for breakfast, did the commanders admit it had just been a trick. But there we learned how to get away when needed. Not one of my Scout-brothers profited from this training while trying to escape from forced marches towards Germany in the summer and fall of 1944.

Characteristically, typical for Hungarian and especially Budapest assimilated Jews, we were not prepared to resist or fight. That remained a choice for the very small group of radical Zionists and some communists, a few of whom had been members of our Boy Scout troop, but it was not a general attitude. Maybe our last war game, which would not be conducted, hinted at an “ideological” change of heart: These war games were played so that one half of the troop was wearing blue numbers and the other half red. The blues defended the encampment, the reds attacked. If your number was called by the other side, you were dead and had to march off to “the otherworld.” In our troop there was always some historical background story attached to the annual war game, such as the Trojan War, the battle of Königgrätz, or something similar. The last one planned for March 19, 1944, was to be about Bar

Kochba fighting the Romans. Thus, it called upon a militant Jewish tradition. Alas, the Romans—this time from the Third Reich—arrived with tanks and “Bar Kochba’s fighters” had to go home, soon to be locked up in a ghetto.

But the years in the 311th Vörösmarty Troop were also a cultural experience. We were avidly reading newly published books. One of our favorite readings was the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus that had just appeared in a new Hungarian translation, I think so, by Devecseri.<sup>32</sup> It was not the Bible or some kind of boring Boy Scout literature.

So through all these activities we were in a way negating the exclusion from the Hungarian Boy Scout Association—that I think can be seen as a kind of naïveté, and a typical belief of the assimilated “Jewish” middle class, like my father and many of our friends, who were convinced that nothing like the murderous persecution of Jews could happen in Hungary. “This is not Germany, this is not occupied Poland: It won’t happen here,” they used to say. But it happened. It happened.

**GK:** *How did your family live during these times?*

**JMB:** In 1942–43, my father was on the Russian front for eighteen months in a labor battalion where Jews and Socialists were systematically murdered. He came home as slim as my little finger and sick with gangrene, typhoid fever, or something similar.

**GK:** *When did he come home?*

**JMB:** They were at the Don, and that front—the Hungarian Second Army’s front—collapsed in a few days in January 1943. He arrived in Budapest only in June or July. Some of his comrades decided to stay there and wait for the Russians to be saved; but it did not work out very well because the poor Russians could not take care of the prisoners of war and did not even quite understand the difference between these soldiers and those soldiers. My father and his friend George Heltai<sup>33</sup>—

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<sup>32</sup> Gábor Devecseri (1917–71), poet, translator.

<sup>33</sup> George (György) Heltai (1914–74), international lawyer, historian.

who then was to play an important role in my later life—decided to march home. So they started out from the bend of the Don towards Hungary.

**GK:** *How long did it take to cover that distance?*

**JMB:** I think a couple of months, maybe even three. When they reached Kiev, they were all very sick and were put into some field hospital for many weeks. Therefore, in the following years, when many of the old Boy Scouts and many older friends of ours were regularly called up for labor service, my father was not for a while. It was then that we, the Boy Scouts, learned to be a bit less patriotic and less enthusiastic Hungarians, when the nice old tents, of which we were so proud at every summer camp, were cut up for windbreakers and backpacks for those who were called up. Many of them were taken to the mines in Bor, Yugoslavia, and few of them came home—very few who were liberated by the partisans.

**GK:** *What happened to your father at the end of the war?*

**JMB:** Let me go back first to the last year of the war. When in March 1944 the German occupation and the open persecution began in Hungary, we first had to leave our flat, as the house was not declared a “Jewish house,” a so-called “starred house” marked by a yellow Star of David. We had to move into a flat closer to the Danube, where it was not too bad yet. There was maybe just our family in one room, but in others, dozens of people were crowded into one.

We, the young people, had a reasonably good life, however in restricted freedom, and forgot to be afraid. Somehow, we were teenagers enough to be interested in music, love, and friendship rather than to be afraid. Then we dreamed up all kinds of nonsense as well. Recently, a letter of mine was found by my then girlfriend, in which we discussed that we would not go to bed with each other because as long we were virgins we could not be killed. And it worked out! We did not and did survive. But the logic was hardly stringent.

I wore the yellow star, obligatory since early April 1944, very rarely because my friends and I, as Boy Scouts, were all enrolled in first aid

services and fire defense brigades that provided us with some arm-bands allowing free movement.

Our family also was really lucky, in that the firm of my father was declared a military supply factory and thus protected by the Hungarian army; so we moved out to there for a few months in the summer. Then, in the fall, the deportation of the so-called “Jews” of Budapest was stopped partially by the intervention of Horthy, partially because the Germans had other things to do. So the situation was a little bit milder until October 15, when the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross took over as the regent prepared the withdraw from the war in an unprofessional way and was arrested by the Germans.

At that point, it became clear that our life was in immediate danger. We started to use the false papers acquired earlier, like my nice Levente IDs, and went into illegality. My father moved into the pantry of an old trade-union comrade of his at Nádor Street 20, where he lived on three square meters for three months. Mother and I then moved out from any kind of Jewish housing and got ourselves certified as being refugees from Transylvania, which by that time was under the control of the Soviet and Romanian armies. Once you got that certificate—and that was very important—you received ration cards for bread and milk and whatever. With that in hand and with our reasonably good false papers we moved from one sublet room to another.

Once there was a dangerous situation due to a conspiratorial mistake of one of my friends who had contacts with the underground. He allowed his mother to come to my flat, of which he knew where it was, perhaps to get more of my fake IDs. When my mother and I came home, probably from the movies—we spent most of the time at the movies, where it was warm and anonymous—the landlady said: “A Jewess was looking for you.” “Ah,” we said, “interesting, we know none; but we’ll be back later.” We turned around, walked out carrying what little we had with us, and by the time we reached the next corner we saw an Arrow Cross patrol arriving at the house, in all likelihood for the Transylvanians with Jewish friends.

**GK:** *The landlady had obviously reported to the Arrow Cross authorities.*

**JMB:** Well, she was “fulfilling her civic duty.” So we did not go back. We spent that night at Deák Square in the little cubicle of the air raid shelter in the basement of the painter János Kmetty<sup>34</sup> and his wife, friends of my mother. By that time—maybe late November or early December—people were living in the air raid shelters almost all the time. There, we spent a night or two, which I remember well because the Kmettys had a pile of packs of cigarettes in the corner of their cubicle, from which I took probably the first pack of cigarettes of my life. And I did not give up smoking seriously until very recently. But I am still lighting up occasionally—falsifying the adage that “smokers die young.”

After a while, my mother got tired from moving around and I escorted her to the pantry where my father was hiding. Considering that the two of them had been quarrelling with each other their whole lives—I believe, in great love—I regarded putting them together as the most vicious thing I have ever committed. Still, they survived being locked up for about a month, but in mid-January they had enough and decided to leave and find some other hiding place. They were standing at the door of the house when they saw through the peephole first a German and then a Russian soldier running past. On January 14, 1945, they were liberated. I was living a few blocks farther north, whence the Russians came, started out to fetch them, and we met half-way in Honvéd Street. War and persecution were over.

**GK:** *Now let us continue with the end of the war.*

**JMB:** With the liberation our life changed in many respects. To begin with, our flat in Pest had been bombed, so we moved to the villa of my grandfather in Buda. My father first became head of the factory workers’ committee, then later boss of the trust for the textile industry, and was busy nationalizing the industry. He became quite a functionary, with a black ZIS automobile for a few years. My mother went back to journalism; she worked for a few years at the illustrated weekly magazine of the Soviet army, called Szivárvány (Rainbow), and she wrote the first reports on the artists and writers who were killed by the Na-

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34 János Kmetty (1889–1975), painter.

zis—Miklós Radnóti,<sup>35</sup> Antal Szerb,<sup>36</sup> and others, including her nephew, the painter Imre Ámos.<sup>37</sup>

I was sick for a short while immediately after the liberation; I had jaundice, and that was a bit of a problem because I was prescribed food made of flour and sugar. Now, exactly flour and sugar were not available in that time, but my father and I found a solution. We figured that in the bombed and burned down mills of northern Pest there would be burned piles of flour. And there were; the top of each was coal, the middle of it was brown, and the bottom of it was white flour. We mined flour from there and mined sugar from an office in an agricultural industrial firm where my grandfather used to work. They had sugar in their presentation shop that was again burnt, but at the bottom it was edible.

I pretty soon recovered and got active in the Hungarian Communist Party on the recommendation of Heltai, the friend of my father with whom he had marched across the Ukraine and who became the secretary of the Fifth District Communist Party cell. First, I went there to help making posters, but by the end of February, I was recommended for membership and became a member of the Hungarian Communist Party.

**GK:** *That means that in February 1945, before the end of the war, you were already a part of politics.*

**JMB:** Yes, and I made the first kind of stengazeta,<sup>38</sup> or tatsepao, on the building palisade of the Soviet Memorial in the center of Budapest, on Szabadság Square, with a map showing the progress of the Soviet army towards Berlin. I saw the first of such a poster-bulletin at the place where we were forced to do public work, to help the Soviet army build a small bridge between Pest and Margaret Island. Only half of

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35 Miklós Radnóti (1909–44), poet.

36 Antal Szerb (1909–45), writer.

37 Imre Ámos (1907–44), painter, graphic artist.

38 Verbatim a “wall journal,” which was originally a place to post news or suggestions in nationalized Russian factories after the revolution. Later it became a medium of party propaganda. *Tatsepao*, or *Dazibao*, is its Chinese counterpart.

Margaret Bridge had been blown up; the part from the island to Buda survived—as the only bridge in the city. The replacement was called the “Manci Bridge”—Manci being the diminutive of Margit-Margaret—and there they had one of these wall-newspapers.

**GK:** *And what happened to your unfinished school education?*

**JMB:** School started again sometime in early March of 1945; the classes had been reorganized, of course, not based on religious observance or “race.” We were mourning a few of our classmates who had been killed by either the Germans or Hungarian Nazis or during the war, but not too many of them. Due to good luck, altogether three or four of the boys were lost from the class.

I did not care too much about going to classes but was busy with my political activities. We all spent lots of time in the neighboring building that was the Budapest Court of Justice, where the war criminals were tried and executed. We went over there to listen to that and to watch public executions performed in good medieval fashion.

Having finished the seventh grade of the gymnasium, I wanted to get away from that soon, and in 1946, in the fall, I registered at the University of Budapest as an extraordinary student. You could do that—register as a guest student—and if within a year you presented your gymnasium graduation diploma, credit would be given for the courses.

**GK:** *So you started your university studies before you had finished school.*

**JMB:** Before finishing, yes. And that was the year when I regularly went to university and skipped most of the classes at the gymnasium, while at the same time working busily in the Communist Party. Apparently, at seventeen or eighteen years of age one can do an enormous amount of things and make 25 hours out of one day. I was busy in the Fifth District Youth Movement, which was called the Democratic Youth (MADISZ), but in fact it was the Communist Party’s youth movement. When the family moved over to Buda, I was even given a post in the District Party Committee in charge of the youth movement in the Second District in 1946–48.

Then, to finish my account of my party career briefly, in 1948 the Social Democratic Party was absorbed by the communists and my job in the Second District was given to a young Social Democrat; so I was sent to other jobs by the party. In those times you went wherever the party sent you, and I got into the central office of the youth movement doing all kinds of things. For a while I was part of the brigade movement—those who went to Yugoslavia to build the Youth Railway, and then in Hungary the Danube–Tisza canal. For a few months I was also sent to the Boy Scouts Association that was first planned to be politically *gleichgeschaltet* and unified with the pioneers, but then it was simply dissolved. Finally, I ended up in the editorial office of the weekly newspaper called *Március Tizenötödike* (March 15, referring to the beginning of the revolution in 1848), published for secondary school students.

But in 1950 they started a kind of general purge of the functionaries who were older members of the party and of so-called bourgeois background. They were gradually eliminated, so that all the cadres would be “by the grace of the Stalinist leadership.” It was in a way a parallel to the big anti-Titoist trials, that of László Rajk<sup>39</sup> in Hungary and others in all of the satellite countries. By August 1950, I was subjected to a disciplinary procedure in which my party membership was suspended, and I lost my job in the, by then openly called, Communist Youth Movement (the Komsomol).

**GK:** *What had you been accused of?*

**JMB:** The main problem was my so-called bourgeois background. My parents were former Social Democrats. By that time, my father was not the big boss anymore but ended up in the state’s financial control office, the General Accounting Office, as an economist. Mother was done with journalism; the newspaper of the Soviets had died long before, and her publication possibilities were shrinking. From then on, she worked only for the children’s program of the Hungarian radio, translating and writing children’s tales.

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39 László Rajk (1909–49), communist politician. He was sentenced to death and executed in one of Mátyás Rákosi’s show trials.



In the meantime, I learned from Ignazio Silone's article<sup>40</sup> that in these procedures a standard method was used to isolate you from your ex-comrades by three-pronged accusations, which was applied also in my case.

First, the victim should be accused of political deviance, which will not necessarily alienate him from the others, because they may say: "Well, he may have different views." I was accused of "having a bad relationship to the working class," which was represented by a young man "of proletarian background" at the now unified paper of the Komsomol, whom I did not like very much.

Then, there should be some kind of sexual matter. So I was accused of having had an affair with a young lady. Both of us acted as press contacts to the Russian Komsomol Delegation during the World Youth Festival in 1949 in Hungary, and when it was over we accompanied them to the border. In the middle of the night we said goodbye to them and came home in a sleeping car—but there was only a two person's compartment. A clear case. And finally, adding some financial impropriety to the two other accusations, we dared to charge the sleeping car tickets to the Komsomol paper.

So this was their way of kind of cutting you off from your contacts; the political views and sexual affairs may alienate some people, as they may think that it is not very appropriate, but money affairs—now that was really, really bad! Subsequently, on the basis of these three accusations, I was suspended and socially isolated. To my good luck, this happened just after my having finished university—we will talk about that in a moment—so that they could not stop me from getting a diploma, which they would have probably done otherwise.

**GK:** *Now, can I just ask about this, since we will move then on to the university and other matters? You were an activist from 1945 to 1950. And your family was also involved. So when did the first doubts, the first uncertainties, or the first bad feelings come about and how?*

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<sup>40</sup> Ignazio Silone, "Ignazio Silone," in *The God that Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper & Row, 1949).

**JMB:** That is difficult to answer; I have often tried to reconstruct that, but it was very long ago. The question is: at what point was it a fear from not being close to the party line, from losing that youthful trust in a “higher truth,” and when did I—or we, all my old friends—realize that we believed in a pack of lies? It was certainly a longer process. I think again it was my friend George Heltai’s fate that may have played a role here: He was arrested in one of the trials following that of Rajk’s, as he had been a major officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Rajk and was charged with being an “imperialist agent.” That was hardly convincing for me, although—and that is characteristic—even though I could not quite believe the charges, I did avoid meeting his family. My parents kept up the friendship with his wife and children, but I rather avoided them. That was easy because I did not live with my parents anymore; I had my own flat, probably the first commune ever founded in Hungary. Four or five of us had acquired a flat through party contacts on Szinyei Merse Street, which is still in the hands of the family of one of our friends.

But “the party, the party is always right,” and I somehow tried to accommodate to the events—several other old comrades vanished from one day to the other—perhaps thinking that it was some mistake and would be repaired. What was going on in the country and what I had been part of became clear to me only when, in October 1950, I was called up for national service to the Hungarian Peoples’ Army. There, I met my own generation that consisted not of communist functionaries but of workers and peasants, and intellectuals and burghers—and they told me about the realities of “socialism.”

**GK:** *Was that a military service?*

**JMB:** Yes, I was two years in the army.

**GK:** *After your studies?*

**JMB:** After university. That was because I started studies a year earlier. Those who started with my own generation received some kind of military training at the university, became reservist officers or something

similar, and had to serve only a few months. But since I missed the training that started after my time, I was called up and had to do two years of military service.

The first year in the army I served in Budapest. At that point, apparently, my negative “dossier,” my party files, had not reached the army yet, and I was in a very confidential position at the radio reconnaissance battalion where linguistic knowledge was valued. We were listening to the communications of the Americans and their “chained dog,” Tito.<sup>41</sup> I learned Morse code, which proved to be useful much later. So I served the first year there, but by the end of the year...

**GK:** *Your files reached them.*

**JMB:** ...or independently, the political commissar found out that my father had been a count, a Graf—he obviously used a wrong Gotha Almanac.

**GK:** *Yes, because that was not true, of course.*

**JMB:** But that was enough to send me to the countryside, to an infantry battalion in Nyíregyháza.<sup>42</sup> However, this proved to be a blessing, for had I remained in Budapest, I would have had to serve at least three years—after the special training—or even more.

**GK:** *And how did all this happen? Did they call you in and say: “Why have you concealed this from us?” or something similar?*

**JMB:** No, at the end of the year a list was read out saying who had to stay on after the training year, and then the *politruk*<sup>43</sup> openly told me why I was not listed among those who would stay on the reconnaissance unit. “I have found out that your father was a count,” he said.

**GK:** *And what did you say then?*

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<sup>41</sup> Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), communist politician, first president of Yugoslavia.

<sup>42</sup> Nyíregyháza in northeastern Hungary, quite close to the home of János Bak’s mother.

<sup>43</sup> *Politruk*: an abbreviation of the Russian title *polititscheskij rukovoditel*, army officer responsible for the ideological instruction of cadets.

**JMB:** I told him that that it was not very likely because mine is a Jewish family; those were sometimes given baronial titles, but were no counts. “Shut up. It’s a command,” he responded. “And you are to report to the number so and so infantry battalion, the old 32th Regiment. Pack up and go!” I went, and there I had a pleasant position as one of the radio operators of the regiment. We had our own room, three of us, and a tent in summer. It was not that unpleasant at all.

**GK:** *Now, let us stop here with your general history and let us switch back to the university.*

**JMB:** As I said, I started university studies in the academic year 1946–47; in that and the next few years the university still had a mixed character. Some new professors had already been appointed, but the old ones were still around. It was quite funny that in philosophy Julius Kornis,<sup>44</sup> a second-rate conservative Catholic philosopher, was lecturing on Aquinas in one of the lecture halls, and next to it was nobody less than Georg Lukács<sup>45</sup> on Fichte and Hegel.

So how did I get there? I do not have a quite clear idea. As a youth I was interested in engineering but did not have very good marks in mathematics and physics (just about survived the graduation exam), so the Technical University was out of question.

Rather, I listened to my friends who planned to go to the Arts faculty. In those times we were a very close little group of three. One was György Litván,<sup>46</sup> whom I had known for some time—we were classmates after 1945 and his father was a colleague of my father, the head of another textile factory—the other, Pál Forgács, whom I knew from the Boy Scout troop, had been with his father in the Swedish Embassy and a collaborator of Raoul Wallenberg. The three of us spent much time together at that time, if I remember well, preparing a reform proposal for Hungarian primary education, for which an open competition had been announced. We were very big boys, barely seventeen or so, totally grown up. Litván, whom I convinced to join the Commu-

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44 Julius (Gyula) Kornis, (1885–1958), philosopher, politician.

45 Georg Lukács (1885–1971), philosopher, literary historian.

46 György Litván (1929–2006), historian.

nist Party although he had more sympathy for Trotsky, and Forgács wanted to study at the Faculty of Arts, so I joined them—sadly, Forgács died in the polio epidemic of 1946.

So we were looking for what to study at the Faculty of Arts. We started out as what was called at that time “free students” not registering for teachers’ training—that meant eight semesters of study and then submitting a dissertation, with no rules to the curriculum—so we could take whatever we wanted. That I ended up studying the Middle Ages was in no way determined in advance. I was a very good Latinist in school and that gave me a background for it. I registered for reading charters, paleography, and diplomatics with Imre Szentpétery.<sup>47</sup> Then we took all kinds of other courses; for example, András Alföldi’s<sup>48</sup> course on magic and sorcery in Ancient Rome. Now, there we got into a bit of a trouble, because in those times it was not marked whether a course was for first-year, second-year, or third-year students. When we arrived, we saw that it was attended by three or four of his own assistants, one or two of his doctorandi/ae, and two of us. Within weeks we found out that it was far above our heads.

**GK:** *“Two of us”—does that mean you and Litván?*

**JMB:** Yes. In a few weeks we found out that the lecture course was an advanced doctoral course, but with seven or eight people altogether attending we could not drop it—that would have been conspicuous. Thus, we had the good luck of having attended the last course of the great scholar Alföldi in Hungary, for at the end of the year he left for Princeton. We had less luck with his son-in-law, József Deér,<sup>49</sup> the medievalist; we signed up for his seminar and got his permission to take it, because we were good Latinists, but he took a leave and left then for Germany and Switzerland. I met him only more than a decade later, in Bern.

**GK:** *What did the students think of this exodus?*

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47 Imre Szentpétery (1885–1950), historian, diplomatist.

48 András Alföldi (1895–1981), historian, archaeologist.

49 József Deér (1905–72), historian.

**JMB:** Well, they were so-called “bourgeois professors,” so it was better to get rid of them.

**GK:** *Was that the general opinion?*

**JMB:** No, by no means general. This was ours, the communists’ opinion; the non-communists had surely different views.

**GK:** *Where there other remarkable colleagues among the students at the university?*

**JMB:** It was in Szentpétery’s class that I got acquainted with Éva Balázs, Mrs. Hunyadi.<sup>50</sup> She was a student of Elemér Mályusz<sup>51</sup> and started teaching medieval history but later switched to become a professor on the eighteenth century for decades. Litván knew her from before because he had studied Latin with her father. She took care of us in 1946 and did not stop doing that for sixty more years, until her death in 2006. That is what I call a lifetime engagement and that is what I learned from her.

**GK:** *And what did you learn from your professors?*

**JMB:** As I said, in all my studies I mainly learned how to teach and how not to teach. For example, not to teach like Peter Váczy:<sup>52</sup> his lectures were incomprehensible. He was sitting on the pulpit with a piece of paper in front of him and mumbling. I did not know that many years later, when he was finally expelled from the university as a “bourgeois professor,” he had a very fine private seminar and excellent people were trained by him in the way as I would nowadays do it myself. But at that time that was not clear to us.

We started with the abovementioned kind of unorganized studying—this, that, and the other thing. What I mainly enjoyed was the reading of charters with Szentpétery, if I remember correctly, four or five times a week in the morning for an hour.

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<sup>50</sup> Éva H. Balázs (1915–2006), historian.

<sup>51</sup> Elemér Mályusz (1898–1989), historian.

<sup>52</sup> Péter Váczy (1904–94), historian.

**GK:** *It was a very intensive course then.*

**JMB:** Yes, that was more or less mandatory for medievalists at that point. It was characteristic for those times that Szentpétery was teaching paleography, the structure of charters and everything else about diplomatics, but what was not done at all, was translating the Latin into Hungarian: it was taken for granted that all those present understood Latin as if it were their mother tongue. I enjoyed that very much, but otherwise I do not remember very much more from those first few years.

Then, I think, Éva H. Balázs suggested to us not to do this kind of unstructured studying but to sign up for teachers' training. That was a curriculum within the university; if you wanted a diploma for teaching at a gymnasium, the state exam, then you had to register with that institution and select two fields that are gymnasium subjects.

I first started with history and English, then English was abolished as "an imperialist language," and I tried history and geography; I liked it, maybe for a semester, attending the courses of Tibor Mendöl<sup>53</sup> in "Human Geography," which was somewhat similar to what the French school of the *Annales* would do later. But soon I realized that the subject would involve quite a lot of natural sciences, which would not be right for me.

At that moment, an interesting alternative appeared; namely, Sándor Szalai,<sup>54</sup> formerly a journalist, was given the first chair of sociology at a Hungarian university. Sociology started in Hungary in the late nineteenth century, but all of its first practitioners, like Karl Mannheim,<sup>55</sup> Arnold Hauser,<sup>56</sup> and others, had left after World War I. I signed up for that and was even given a minor assistant's job, helping out in the newly founded library.

Actually, Litván and I already had such a job with Péter Váczy on Éva H. Balázs's recommendation, but we did not do it too well. When we were presented to Váczy, either Litván or I asked him whether he

<sup>53</sup> Tibor Mendöl (1905–66), geographer.

<sup>54</sup> Sándor Szalai (1912–83), sociologist, philosopher.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), sociologist.

<sup>56</sup> Arnold Hauser (1892–1978), art historian, sociologist.

was familiar with Friedrich Engels' book on the German Peasant War.<sup>57</sup> He said in his mumbling way: "I may have... I probably have read that at some point." Now for us that meant an illiterate bourgeois who did not know Engels by heart. So we did not make friends with Váczy.

Litván then soon moved to modern history, and I concentrated on sociology. That was again something that helped me to learn how to teach. Szalai immediately had all his students involved in an actual empirical project in teams together with him as an equal, and in the seminars we would talk about the work we had been doing together. That was something I have tried to learn ever since. However, it was short-lived, because in 1950, Szalai, a leading Social Democrat, was arrested—he spent six years in jail and a labor camp—and the chair of sociology was abolished.

I think I left it earlier, before his arrest, in a totally impertinent way. There was a party order that sociology is a bourgeois science and we should not go there. And I remember that I had work left undone, some library work assigned to me, and I simply left it on the table and marched off. At the end of the semester I showed up for an oral exam, called *colloquium*, and Szalai was a bit surprised. "Do you really think that I should talk to you at all?" he asked. I managed to apologize for that only twenty years later, when we met in America, where he was working at the United Nations, and we became good friends.

**GK:** *Talking about history and sociology, was István Hajnal<sup>58</sup> at the university at that moment?*

**JMB:** Yes, he was! And I think I even took one part of his course "The History of the Loom," on which he lectured in four semesters, I believe. And starting from there, from the loom and the weavers, he presented economic and social history. You have worked on weavers and heretics, Gábor, so you can imagine how interesting that could be. It must have been a great course, but we were too prejudiced for under-

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57 First published as: Friedrich Engels, "Der deutsche Bauernkrieg," *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue* 5/6 (1850).

58 István Hajnal (1882–1956), historian.



standing that. I must have judged it not Marxist enough and dropped it, not realizing what a fine scholar he was.

**GK:** *Do you have any recollection of how the Gleichschaltung was gradually coming about in those years?*

**JMB:** In the medieval field, the transition seems to have been less painful. Szentpétery and Domanovszky<sup>59</sup> were at pensionable age and were retired; Deér had left for Germany. The one medievalist, who was entirely silenced, was Elemér Mályusz, whom the communists could never pardon for his book on the émigrés of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. Do you know about that?

**GK:** *No, never heard of it.*

**JMB:** It came out mainly for readers in English and German—as *Fugitive Bolsheviks* and *Sturm au Ungarn*.<sup>60</sup> It was based on material Mályusz collected while working at the Vienna Archives—there is always a Hungarian historian attached to the Vienna State Archives. He collected this material on the Hungarian commissars in exile in Vienna and published it. I had the colligatum, based on which he worked, in my hands when I was interested in the history of 1919. These pamphlets and brochures of the Hungarian communists accusing each other of everything save cannibalism are in the National Library in Vienna. Mályusz obviously got a government order to do that kind of thing, although it did not fit his horizons—he was on the one hand a medievalist, on the other hand working on the nineteenth-century palatine Joseph. He must have been given an order to prepare an anti-Bolshevik propaganda book. Most of it he could take verbatim from the comrades talking about each other in a most impertinent, most disgusting way, and he just had to cleverly put it together.

59 Sándor Domanovszky (1877–1955), historian.

60 Elemér Mályusz, *Fugitive Bolsheviks* (London: Richards, 1931); Elemér Mályusz, *Sturm auf Ungarn: Volkskommissäre und Genossen im Auslande* (Munich: Südost-Verlag Adolf Dresler, 1931). Actually, it was also published in Hungarian at a provincial press (Napkelet, 1931). First Hungarian publication in book form: Elemér Mályusz, *A vörös emigráció* [The red emigration] (Máriabesnyő and Gödöllő: Attraktor, 2006).

**GK:** *When was that published?*

**JMB:** Well, this came out only in 1931; interestingly, that was a bit late, twelve years after the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but obviously it was then somehow useful for Hungarian government propaganda. Anti-Bolshevism, coupled with anti-Semitism—many of the communist leaders were Jews!—was a main pillar of the political ideology in the Horthy era. For that, Mályusz had fallen into disgrace after 1945; worse than that, he was virtually unable to work but was, as we now know, doing great scholarship and research during that time.

**GK:** *I did not know about the book. But let us return to the personal and ideological changes at the university again.*

**JMB:** The removed “bourgeois” professors were replaced by scholars who earlier would not be admitted to the university. Emma Léderer,<sup>61</sup> became professor of medieval Hungarian history in 1950. She was a pupil of Domanovszky who wrote fine studies in the 1930s but, being Jewish, was not given a university post until 1946. Then, as soon as appointed, she wrote a book on the “origins of feudalism” in Hungary: a decently researched text, in fact, on the beginnings of private landholding, dressed in Marxist-Leninist garb.

I passed the first exam with her with a middling grade, but not because of not being “Marxist” enough, but because I knew little about a major debate in 1914–16 on Hungarian history, the “Tagányi-Erdélyi dispute”<sup>62</sup>—which I must have at that time regarded as worthless “bourgeois” scholarship. In fact, the debate touched important issues and contains valuable scholarship.

“Niania”—that was her nickname—was, I understand, a good teacher and remained a devoted communist. Once, later, while still in Hungary, I risked being critical of some party policy of Sovietization: “Shut up!” she said. “We would be dead had they not arrived in time!” That was true, but...

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<sup>61</sup> Emma Léderer (1897–1977), historian.

<sup>62</sup> The debate in the 1910s between Károly Tagányi (1858–1924) and László Gyula Erdélyi (1868–1924) was about some basic issues of social history in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

So there were various reasons to follow the party line.

Another medievalist was György Székely,<sup>63</sup> originally trained as lawyer. I did not get acquainted with him during my studies. He was a widely read man, an intelligent but not exactly original historian. I understand that during his tenure as dean and rector, he kept the university free of “revisionists” and “counterrevolutionaries.”

But then, as I wrote in my memories in the *Annual* of our department,<sup>64</sup> I was always in and out of medieval studies. In my later years at the university, there was again a party order, probably by Erzsébet Andics,<sup>65</sup> the commissar and professor for history at Budapest University, that “we don’t do this kind of clerical Middle Ages, we have to do the history of the working-class movement.” So I was told to write my thesis not on something medieval but on the history of the German-speaking workers’ party that was the precursor of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party—the *Allgemeiner Ungarischer Arbeiterverein* (1880–90). They had a weekly journal in German; I managed through friends at the National Library to borrow the one volume of the ten years of its existence. And since my German was as good as my Hungarian, I simply translated articles from that with a little bit of sauce of Marx and Engels and probably Lenin and Stalin as well on the top.

**GK:** *Who was directing the thesis?*

**JMB:** God knows; I would imagine Andics. Perhaps nobody was really directing it, or I do not remember. I realized later that it was used by some historian of the working-class movement in an official publication: I recognized my wording of the translation.

**GK:** *Was it not common at that time to have supervisors for theses?*

**JMB:** Frankly, I do not remember. These were the times when I had plenty to worry about concerning my party career. I wrote this totally

63 György Székely (1924–2016), historian.

64 János M. Bak, “A Life in Medieval Studies or *Apologia pro vita sua*,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 14 (2008): 285–98.

65 Erzsébet Andics (1902–86), historian.

worthless thesis very quickly, I submitted it and got first-class marks on it, just as I got first-class marks in Marxism-Leninism, and earned my teacher's diploma in August 1950.

**GK:** *So if you could summarize here: How would you characterize the university in transformation from 1946 to 1950? You spoke about the departing “bourgeois” professors and the coming in of some new ones, but as a whole, what was the university like?*

**JMB:** As a whole, the university was still a reasonably tolerable place. It did not become as school-like and narrow-minded as it did later, as far as I know, in the later fifties and thereafter. During the time I was studying there—at any rate until 1948–49, the open communist takeover—there was a certain amount of pluralism, because the older professors were only gradually being replaced and there was not that kind of mediocrity yet, which then took over in the later years with very few exceptions. Of course, I knew and know little about the “politically touchy” fields of study, such as modern history, where the changes must have been radical.

However, as I said, I also knew very little about life at the university because I was only doing there as much as was necessary, because I was mostly interested in my party jobs. I more or less regularly attended the meetings of a little group of the historians' Communist Party cell, at that time led by Peter Hanák.<sup>66</sup> We organized additional private seminars on Marxist history and invited the economic historian Zsigmond Pál Pach<sup>67</sup>—at that time still a gymnasium professor—but were told by the party center that it was not appropriate for us. Later he became the director of the Institute for History of the Hungarian Academy, a good historian in a reasonably Marxist way in contrast to the Marxist-Leninist idiots. And he protected a number of my friends, not exactly party-line historians, in his institute.

What else was there? There were, for a while, other political units at the university. There were cells of the Social Democratic Party's

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Hanák (1921–97), historian.

<sup>67</sup> Zsigmond Pál Pach (1919–2001), historian.

Youth Movement and of the other coalition parties as well. Political and ideological uniformity was achieved only by about the time I graduated.

However, it seems to have become increasingly oppressive. I have a story that I did not remember but was told me by my later good friend László Péter,<sup>68</sup> who became professor at the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He told me that, perhaps in 1949, there was already some kind of obligatory Marxist-Leninist course, where he arrived a little bit late. I marched up to him in the name of the Communist Party and said: "Dear colleague, not everybody has to attend university." So there was a kind of pressure growing to subject everyone to all this communist nonsense.

**GK:** *As for the system of the university, did the curriculum change in these four years?*

**JMB:** Oh yes, fifty-five times. For me, finally, when sociology was abolished, I was moved to "history and political economy." I had to attend a few courses in political economy, including a course by Imre Nagy on agricultural economics and one by the head of the Planning Office, Comrade Berei,<sup>69</sup> on state planning, and some genuine economics classes. Those I managed by friends making me remember the answers in a crash course overnight so that the following morning I could survive the exam and promptly forget all of it. So I did not become a political economist, but my final diploma lists it as my expertise.

**GK:** *Now, there you were in 1950, out of your party job but with a university diploma. You did two years of military service, and then you got to professional life. How did that professional life begin for you?*

**JMB:** My professional non-party life could begin pro forma already in the fall of 1950. A former colleague of mine from the university and fellow communist Endre Arató<sup>70</sup> worked in the Ministry of Education at

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68 László Péter (1929–2008), historian.

69 Andor Berei (1900–79), economist, politician.

70 Endre Arató (1921–77), historian.

that time. He was planning a secondary school for nurses and kindergarten teachers in the languages of the national minorities. He was otherwise a student of nationality movements in nineteenth-century Hungary, a very decent person from Komárom (Komárno), an old Communist and resistance fighter who died quite young. He got a job for me as of September 1, 1950, and although such a school eventually was not founded, I was on the payroll of the Budapest City Council as “teacher on leave for military service.” Therefore, when I got out of the army I right away got a position in a general (8 years) school on the outskirts of Budapest, then called Pestújhely. This was quite an achievement because lots of those who were kicked out of Communist Party positions in the 1950s ended up carrying bricks for the socialist megaprojects.

In Pestújhely, I had a job teaching history, Russian, and geography, and was a class teacher of the sixth form for twelve-year-old boys. It became clear to me that I like teaching best of all, regardless of age and type of pupils. I learned a lot from the old elementary school teachers. I was also the leader of the Red Pioneers’ Troop whom then I took out to very nice hikes and excursions remembering my old Boy-Scout days.

I would have stayed there probably without much complaint with the exception that it was an hour by tram from home to get to the school, had not an occasion of change emerged during the first reform government of Imre Nagy (1953–54). A new gymnasium was founded that would combine humanist education with training for cultural management—such as directors of cultural centers, neighborhood centers, libraries, and so on. By some good luck, I was invited to help build up that school.

**GK:** *So after one year of teaching in that old-style school, you managed to change your workplace?*

**JMB:** Yes, and that was the first time that I was able to assist in building up a curriculum from scratch—as it happened much, much later at the Central European University (CEU). I had very fine colleagues there, but I remember only the acclaimed poet György Rába,<sup>71</sup> teach-

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<sup>71</sup> György Rába (1924–2011), poet, literary historian.

ing literature, and Yvette Bíró,<sup>72</sup> later professor of history of film at NYU. I liked that school very much, even more than I liked my sixth-graders in Pestújhely. I had a class of the second year of the four-year gymnasium—since we also took pupils who had already started a year earlier elsewhere. Many of those students remained my friends for quite a while—much later, I married one of them. Alas, it lasted only for one year. When the “New Course” of Imre Nagy was abandoned, this school was dissolved by a new minister of culture. The teachers were assigned to various schools, but I finally ended up at what was called the Academy of Commerce. It was more a bureaucratic than a teaching post—supervising trade schools of the Ministry of Trade—but it was survivable, and that was where I stayed until 1956.

**GK:** *We have arrived in 1956. I think that is when a new chapter of your life started.*

**JMB:** Indeed.

**GK:** *Before starting to speak about the “preparation” and talk about what happened in 1956, is there anything in this preceding period that maintained your initial attraction to the Middle Ages, or was that just a period of work and teaching where the Middle Ages were practically absent?*

**JMB:** Not too much, indeed. I still kept in touch of course with Éva H. Balázs, who was at that point already working at the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy and was suggesting to me to find some kind of research subject with which we could then somehow engineer some position of research or similar.

I do not remember whose idea it was; it may very well have been hers—in the meantime she had moved from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century—to do something on the Dutch uprising against the Spaniards, the Eighty-Years’ War. So I started learning Dutch, which, with my reasonable English and native-level German, was not too difficult. I must have published something little somewhere about that, may-

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72 Yvette Bíró (b.1930), essayist, screenwriter, film historian.

be about Hungarian Protestants in Holland, because when I arrived in Vienna in December 1956 I heard that I was on a list at the Dutch Embassy as a “friend of the Netherlands” with priority in case of an immigration request. I did not make use of that; maybe it was a mistake.

As you see, I was not doing anything medieval.

**GK:** *In any case, in 1952–53 medieval studies in Hungary did not seem that attractive, I think.*

**JMB:** They were not very inviting, indeed.

**GK:** *I presume it was an age when the “class struggle” was the principal subject that had to be researched.*

**JMB:** Yes, and I did not know anybody then who was doing better things; I did not know about people whom I met much later like Erik Fügedi<sup>73</sup> or even Elemér Mályusz. So I ended up being high school teacher, got married, had a little daughter and so on, and I was also busy travelling on the tram from Gellérthegey to Pestjühely or inspecting shop clerk apprentice schools. Scholarship was very far away.

We were dirt poor, there was a shortage of everything, and you could buy a piece of lemon on the milk coupon for the baby every half year. My wife was a bookkeeper at a firm even though she had graduated as an economist. But since she was not enthusiastic about the brochure of Comrade Stalin on the economy of socialism, she was almost kicked out of the Karl-Marx University, but just survived and got a bookkeeper job at the other end of town. Although both of us were employed, we earned hardly enough to survive. As an indication of our poverty, I remember that it was worth my while to cheat on the tram tickets I got when taking my Pioneer kids for an excursion, to keep a few for my own travel to school. It was a rather depressing world, grey and hopeless.

**GK:** *At this point let us switch to 1956 and to hope.*

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<sup>73</sup> Erik Fügedi (1916–92), historian.



**JMB:** Hope started in the spring with the Twentieth Soviet Communist Party Congress. Very close friends of mine founded the Petőfi Circle, originally within the Communist Youth Movement, and then were gradually moving further and further away. I was not a major figure in that but the leading persons—Gábor Tánczos,<sup>74</sup> András B. Hegedűs,<sup>75</sup> and Balázs Nagy<sup>76</sup>—were good friends of mine from older times, so I was following what was going on. I attended all the meetings, very exciting meetings on the historical studies in the spring of 1956 where Erzsébet Andics was openly denounced as ruining the life and career of numerous people. Domokos Kosáry<sup>77</sup> spoke up openly about what was going on, also in the historical trade.

And then, later, came other different meetings: the very big debates about the press. In the fall, there was one on education; that was where I spoke a few words on some educational matters—characteristically not during the history debate but in that about school problems. It looked like something might change.

In April, György Litván, at that time a high school teacher, became famous for demanding Rákosi<sup>78</sup> to resign on an open district party forum. In the summer, I was called into the Central Office of the Communist Party by figures who were formerly—and later—political police officers with the words, “Now, comrade, there were unjust steps in the Stalinist period; we need you as an old comrade in arms to correct those—and you should rejoin,” and so on and so forth. It is characteristic of my mental setup of those times that when they offered to return my party member book, I said that I would accept it only if I was marked as a member since 1945. So there was still that interest of being registered as an “old fighter” in the Communist Party, which by that time I had openly criticized.

**GK:** *Did they accept this?*

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<sup>74</sup> Gábor Tánczos (1928–79), sociologist.

<sup>75</sup> András B. Hegedűs (1930–2004), economist.

<sup>76</sup> Balázs Nagy (b. 1926?), political scientist.

<sup>77</sup> Domokos Kosáry (1913–2007), historian.

<sup>78</sup> Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971), communist politician, dictator in Hungary, 1948–56.

## Times of Upheaval

**JMB:** Eventually, I got it back, yes.

**GK:** *With the mark “since 1945”?*

**JMB:** Yes. I got it back sometime at the ridiculous date of mid-October, when the whole edifice was crumbling. It was useful when I crossed the border, though.

To recall the whole story of 1956 here is not my task; the change of Rákosi's quadriga, the lame horses to lame donkeys and so on, and the big re-burial of László Rajk, which I attended in the company of my friend Heltai, who was released from jail by Imre Nagy in 1953. Then there came the students' demonstration on October 23, 1956. I do not remember when exactly I heard that they were shooting at the radio. I was at Kossuth Square when Nagy was kind of trying to find the right words.

**GK:** *I was there too, as a six-year-old. It was the first political demonstration that I saw with my own eyes because we lived near the parliament in Alkotmány Street. That afternoon my grandmother came to our flat: “Gábor, you must come with me now,” she said to my mother and me. “Let him go with me; Gábor, you will remember this day!”*

**JMB:** And you do!

**GK:** *Yes, it is still here, very clearly in my memory. I saw the red star being torn down from the House of Parliament and Imre Nagy appearing on the balcony and giving his address to the crowd.*

**JMB:** And then came these hectic, heroic, and tragic ten days. Most of the time I was in the central building of the university at Egyetem Square in the city center; there was a Revolutionary Committee of Hungarian Intelligentsia. Because of the students' and the writers' role in the prehistory of the uprising, some people or even institutions regarded this committee as an alternative government. They came and asked permission from us for this and that. I mean, it was one of the factors in this double-, triple-, or quadruple-power situation. I also represented the committee in the re-founded Hungarian Boy Scouts

Association. They made contact with us, and I was to meet the Boy Scouts' leaders, some of whom had been through time in jails and so on. They still remembered me as a communist, for a brief period engaged in the dissolution and ruining of the Boy Scout movement. They were reaching out with a left-hand Boy Scout greeting and said: "You have been tricked just as many others, let us start anew." That was moving, I admit.

We were about to visit the leading personalities of the Hungarian Church and would have had a date to see Cardinal Mindszenty<sup>79</sup> on Monday, November 5, but then on Sunday the Soviet army marched in and the government fled. We did not get to meet the cardinal, who at that point was already at the American Embassy.

It was an exciting time; I was mostly working next to an old friend of mine, Professor György Markos,<sup>80</sup> an economic geographer and former officer of the French Résistance. We were trying to coordinate relief efforts with the West and the International Red Cross. So, as I used to say: What does an intellectual do during a revolution? He writes papers and talks on the telephone. In 1956, the revolution with open fighting in parts of the city had also strange elements, for example, that the telephone worked all the time; there was no interruption in the Budapest telephone system.

**GK:** *That is interesting. Could we say that this was a telephone-coordinated revolution?*

**JMB:** Yes, in a way it was; a telephone could be used before what is available nowadays, like social media; no cell phones or the Internet, but we were on the international phone with Bavaria, Vienna, or wherever, and no problem of getting through.

**GK:** *Were there any interesting experiences with these international contacts that you had back then?*

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<sup>79</sup> József Mindszenty (1892–1975), cardinal, archbishop.

<sup>80</sup> György Markos (1902–76), economist, geographer.

## Times of Upheaval

**JMB:** I do not remember them anymore. There was some baron in Bavaria whom we spoke to more than once and Red Cross officials in Vienna. What I essentially remember is that many old friends from communist times, some with years in jail or concentration camps behind them or otherwise having been persecuted in the course of the many purges, whom I had not seen for years, were there. Then, a few of my former pupils from the dissolved cultural gymnasium came to me and were my assistants and couriers, with the sad incident that one of them, while accompanying Polish journalists, was shot dead by the Russians.

I had just got home on Saturday night—I was not at home for all these ten days—and then heard the gunfire the next morning. I was not entirely surprised, because in connection with the shipping of aid we were in touch with the railroad people and heard that Soviet troops were crossing from the Ukrainian border. But then, there were negotiations going on and we did not want to face that Moscow decided to stop the “rebellion.”

For the moment, we were unsure what to do. We started to hear that people were leaving but at the same time it was still alien to us; we still believed that some settlement would be possible. I was listening to Radio Free Europe whence the refugees sent messages, and their attitude and tone was not what I liked. As it is well known, RFE did not support Imre Nagy, whom they regarded as just another Bolshevik. They were not supporting the reform. I hesitated to join those gatherings in the West. It took me quite a while. But when someone came looking for me at my parents' house and I heard that they were searching for Litván, I had to seriously consider leaving the country.

**GK:** *Who was “they”? The Russians? Or the Hungarians?*

**JMB:** The Hungarian New Militia.

**GK:** *When was that precisely?*

**JMB:** Well, that must have been already in mid-November.

**GK:** *Do you think they wanted to arrest you?*

**JMB:** They were looking for people involved. Some of the participants, especially in the post-November 4 opposition had already been arrested, such as Miklós Gimes.<sup>81</sup> There were rumors that a violent repression was starting. Finally, I think in late November, I realized what was going on. I have tried to reconstruct my thinking of those days. I realized there was going to be some kind of consolidation, and as I knew myself that with a young family and no great professional position I feared I would somehow accept the new regime and go back to the boring job, but would be ashamed of it for a lifetime. I knew that I would be coward enough to do that, but I did not want to.

That was when we decided that we would leave, but none of the plans worked out. It was already December when I decided to leave without the family, hoping that they may be able to come later, perhaps legally. I found some connections to people in a village on the western border and then crossed there with not much difficulty. Once I ran into a Soviet patrol, and I pulled out my fresh little party membership book and said that I was here officially—I wrote myself a little piece of paper from the Ministry that said I was inspecting schools in these regions—and insisted with the Russians that they should take me to the Hungarian border guards. There I showed the Ministry document and they drove me back to where I lived. Thus, I saw where and when the patrols were going, packed up in a kind of hiking gear with an elegant black winter coat in the backpack and marched over the open border—all the obstacles had been removed during the previous summer after the declaration of Austrian neutrality.

An hour later I arrived in Lutzmansdorf where I changed into the black overcoat, introduced myself at the local Red Cross as Dr. Bak from Budapest who wishes to go to Vienna. From then on, I was not a nameless refugee anymore but “Herr Dr. Bak aus Budapest.” The same evening, I took a bus to Vienna and found many friends and relatives there. That is another story.

**GK:** *And a new phase of your life.*

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81 Miklós Gimes (1917–58), journalist.

**JMB:** I arrived in Vienna on December 7 or 8, 1956. There I had to choose where to try to go from there. My uncle in New York wanted me to go to America, but that appeared to be too far away for me. And anyhow, our perception of American academia was rather negative at that point. But quite soon I got an offer from the German Student Association, which was helping the refugee students, to be a group leader and language teacher with an impressive salary; I think, it was 200 DM per month. That sounded marvelous, so I signed up and got a group of more than a dozen, with whom I started out in mid-December towards Germany and arrived there just before Christmas. There was a bit of quarrelling at the border with the Americans, who at that time still had the right to “debrief” the refugees from the East, to ask them what they knew about airports and such. I managed to extricate ourselves, gave our names and addresses and said: “You can ask us later, we would like to arrive where we are supposed to be before Christmas.” And so we did, near Nürnberg in a Red Cross home to be enrolled at the University of Erlangen.

Let us remember that the Hungarians were the first postwar refugee group who arrived in West Germany or in the West altogether, so there was no system yet—as it would be later for the Czechs, the Bosnians, and others. There were rather private arrangements with local Red Cross and private benevolent associations. So, for example, when we arrived there, we found two dozen Christmas cakes, *Christstollen*, in the Red Cross home, brought there from the people of Oberaufsess.

We started with German language courses and with exploring the university in Erlangen where we were supposed to be registered, maybe already in the spring semester or the following year. I began orienting myself on where we stood; we were regarded as freedom fighters and our supervisors were not much interested in academic matters. I myself was a bit disoriented in terms of politics: Who were the groups or people I wanted to talk to? We were pretty near to Munich, so there I rather soon met some Hungarians around the circle of one of the popular (“népi”) progressive journals called *Látóhatár* (Horizon), whom I found to be more or less close to my ideas about some kind of socialism without Bolshevik terror.

Professionally I was introduced to Thomas von Bogay,<sup>82</sup> a Hungarian art historian and historian, and he helped me to find connection to József Deér, whom, as I said, I briefly had met in Hungary, to ask him for counsel.

I was looking for a university where I could earn, with the least amount of time, a German PhD. It looked like Göttingen would be my choice, given the good name and that it prescribed only two semesters of enrollment besides having done eight semesters at an accepted university. So I aimed at Göttingen; I asked Deér, who approved of my choice and told me to present myself to Percy E. Schramm<sup>83</sup> and say that he had sent me there.

By the spring of 1957, I had had more or less enough of language teaching and taking care of my group. Particularly because, by then, our employer proved to be a too radical anticommunist; therefore, I resigned. I was not the only one among the group leaders who left when the Student Association wanted to have the Hungarian students participate in courses on anticommunism. We told them that these people, at least some of them, had risked their lives fighting against communist and Soviet domination, and we did not want them to be politically brainwashed. So I packed up and went to Göttingen, reported to Schramm, who welcomed me in a very friendly way, and even found some additional stipend for me, as I was older than most of the refugee students. At that point all Hungarian students who were accepted at universities were given a basic scholarship and some help in housing, for example, by fraternity houses.

**GK:** *Were there other Hungarian students who went to Professor Schramm?*

**JMB:** No, all students went their own ways. While I was still a group leader I realized that some of them had not been students in Hungary—some had not been allowed to study for political reasons—and might live up to the challenge of university study. Whether you were a legitimate student or not depended entirely on your fellows' declarations, because

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82 Thomas von Bogay (1909–94), art historian, historian.

83 Percy Ernst Schramm (1895–1970), historian.

nobody had papers or diplomas with them. So we all made affidavits for each other about having been students of so many semesters at a Hungarian university. It was then up to the person to make good on the statement. A few of my group admitted to having joined us for the sake of the stipend and found themselves other careers; the majority—as far as I know—completed their studies in Erlangen and elsewhere.

While still in Bavaria, I began to find out what my professional status in Germany would be. Since my father relatively soon sent me a copy of my Hungarian diploma, which I presented, I was told that both in Bavaria and in Lower Saxony—probably elsewhere in the Federal Republic as well—I could teach in secondary schools on the basis of it. They were comparing it with what happened in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where in 1950 the universities were still in their old form.

**GK:** *So your diploma was still acceptable.*

**JMB:** Apparently, because in the GDR the universities were not seen as fully *gleichgeschaltet* and made into party-controlled schools, at least in 1950. So I started out in a way with the assurance that if things did not work out well with a German university degree, I could still go and find a job anytime. However, I and everyone else was too Eastern European at that time to really imagine teaching at a German school as foreigners. It was still a very homogeneous Germany. There were very few foreigners in academia—we knew a few Persians, who had left after the fall of the democratic regime of Mossadegh<sup>84</sup>—but other émigrés or refugees would only appear years later.

I started studying with Schramm, and I thought that I had to do two semesters and then I could present a dissertation and get my doctorate. But I realized soon that I knew very little about the Middle Ages and, particularly, what I did know was pretty well out of date. Therefore, I began to study seriously and was very much supported by Percy—as we referred to him. Although I wanted to work on something more generally European, now being in “the West,” on his en-

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84 Mohammad Mossadegh (1882–1967), Iranian politician.



couragement I decided that I would do a Hungarian topic, because that was where I had special knowledge and might be able to contribute to scholarship.

**GK:** *And you knew the language, which was already a great advantage.*

**JMB:** Yes, of course. But, as you know, if you want to study the Middle Ages in Hungary, you should know Latin well and not so much Magyar. Then I wrote my dissertation about the relationship of kings and estates and not only on coronations and insignia, which were Schramm's subjects—this was partly due to the fact that my plan to include the problematic history of the so-called Crown of St. Stephen in the dissertation became obsolete when Deér informed me that his monograph on the crown was as good as ready. In my choice I was, initially unconsciously, reflecting the interests of my generation. Many among the pupils of the masters of that field—who might be called the “Göttingen school of Schramm,” the “Cambridge school of Ullmann,”<sup>85</sup> and the “Princeton school of Kantorowicz”<sup>86</sup>—left the topic of kingship per se and looked at the interaction between rulers and their great men, crown, and estates, which our masters did not do very much. They were interested only in the monarchy itself. But Ullmann's student Jinty Nelson,<sup>87</sup> Kantorowicz's student Ralph Giesey,<sup>88</sup> and many others, including myself, became interested in the relationship between the monarchy and other carriers of power.

**GK:** *It is a strange turn of life that the cataclysms of modern history, your active role in it, and then the emigration brought you back to the Middle Ages, which you had abandoned some ten years before.*

**JMB:** I was probably motivated by having had enough of modern and contemporary history—living it or writing about it. As I already mentioned, I tended to move “in and out of the Middle Ages.” This time

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85 Walter Ullmann (1910–83), historian.

86 Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz (1895–1963), historian.

87 Dame Janet Laughland Nelson (b.1942), historian.

88 Ralph E. Giesey (1923–2011), historian.

it was not quite a move into the Middle Ages, but rather a parallel enterprise. I did not engage in émigré politics in Germany, as did many of my friends; but I was for a while the agent of the best journal in exile, the *Irodalmi Újság* (Literary Gazette), published first in London, then in Paris, mainly by the refugee writers who were very active in the so-called “preparation” of 1956. The original *Irodalmi Újság* had been the leading organ of the ever more outspoken critique of the regime after 1953.

Then, in 1958, an institute was founded by no one other than our old friend and my former party secretary George Heltai, called the Imre Nagy Institute for Political Science. It was a gathering of ex-communist émigrés who all more or less believed that there was a possibility for some kind of communist or left socialist regime without Bolshevik dictatorship, more or less the Imre Nagy platform of 1953—and 1956—somewhat similar to Dubček’s later platform of socialism with a human face. This institute was supported by the Americans, which should be admitted right away, but had allies elsewhere as well: There was a Norwegian Trade Union that supported us, and we had friends in India, who left the Muscovite Communist Party and established another one, and a few more.

**GK:** *Where did this institute have its seat?*

**JMB:** In Brussels, where there was also a library and an archive.

**GK:** *How many collaborators were there?*

**JMB:** There were a few fulltime employees. Besides George as director, there was a secretary; there was, I think, a librarian; and there were a few old friends, such as Balázs Nagy, one of the leaders of the Petőfi Circle, a historian by trade, Zoltán Sztáray,<sup>89</sup> an agro-economist, who served many years in the infamous Recsk labour camp, and Béla Szász,<sup>90</sup> a journalist, who spent years in jail in one of the trials connected to Rajk—

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<sup>89</sup> Zoltán Sztáray (1918–2011), economist.

<sup>90</sup> Béla Szász (1910–99), journalist, author.

and wrote the best book on the process of these “conception trials.”<sup>91</sup> (“Show trial,” the usual name, would be a misnomer here as they were held in total secrecy, not shown to anyone but secret policemen.)

I was regularly participating in the institute’s conferences as one of the external members, of which there were some five or six. I wrote a few pieces mainly on the workers’ councils. We were interested in them, seeing them as a kind of direct democracy, not totally untouched by Trotsky’s ideas. Then, with certain sympathy for the non-communist left in the Spanish Civil War, I wrote several reviews on relevant books.

The institute existed until 1963, and all of us then gradually went through different trajectories of rethinking all of that. Balázs Nagy and a few of his friends decided openly for Trotskyism, joined the Fourth International, pilfered the library and the archive, stole a good part of it, and marched off.

The others, including George Heltai, Péter Kende,<sup>92</sup> and some others, were gradually realizing that there was no third, fourth, or fifth way—I was jokingly calling us the “five-and-a-halfth” International. Our economist friends were gradually convincing us that the entire Marxian project could not work, that already good old Marx’s economics were wrong, as he had learned them from Ricardo,<sup>93</sup> and that the centralized planned economy would not lead anywhere but to oppression. Somewhat later, György Márkus<sup>94</sup> and his friends wrote a book on the dictatorship over the needs, which demonstrates that the communist economic system just cannot work.<sup>95</sup> So we gradually moved to a liberal or social democratic kind of legitimate leftish course.

Then, in 1963, the Americans stopped supporting the institute as a part of the deal in which the Hungarian question was taken off the agenda of the United Nations, for which Kádár<sup>96</sup> released a number of political prisoners in Hungary. It was closed. By that time most of us

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91 Béla Szász, *Volunteers for the Gallows: Anatomy of a Show Trial* (London: Norton, 1971).

92 Péter Kende (b.1927), economist, publicist.

93 David Ricardo (1772–1823), political economist.

94 György Márkus (1934–2017), philosopher.

95 Ferenc Fehér, Ágnes Heller, and György Márkus, *Dictatorship over Needs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

96 János Kádár (1912–89), communist politician, General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, 1956–88.

had some kind of regular academic job. Heltai received an offer to go to Columbia University and sit next to the cold warrior Brzezinski;<sup>97</sup> Béla Szász, editor of the Hungarian version of our journal *Review* and *Études* called *Szemle*—which was supposed to be smuggled into Hungary, but I do not think it had any significant impact—moved to the BBC Hungarian Service.

**GK:** *Was this the moment for you to become a full-time medievalist?*

**JMB:** Well, there came yet another detour. While studying with Schramm, I suddenly became skeptical about earning a living by doing medieval history. I started to contemplate what kind of marketable skills I had besides knowing Latin. And actually, I had one that I had learned with the Boy Scouts and then in the Hungarian Peoples' Army: reading and writing Morse code. Where do you earn money with Morse code? On ships—I must have read about that in detective stories! So I wrote a letter to the only international shipping company I knew about, the Hapag-Lloyd, saying that I would like to be a radio operator on one of their ships. Now, I do not think that Hapag-Lloyd was asked anything by an *Ungarnflüchtling* whom everybody wanted to support. They replied: "No problem, but you have to get a certificate in a school in Hamburg that is run by the German Post Office." So a letter went out to the German Post Office saying that a poor Hungarian refugee wanted to get a certificate. Of course, he was most welcome at the Seefahrtsschule, the Maritime School in Hamburg.

I told Schramm that I would like to go to Hamburg for a couple of semesters, which he, an enthusiastic Hamburger, received with joy and recommended me to Otto Brunner.<sup>98</sup> Sociologist friends of mine recommended me to Helmut Schelsky,<sup>99</sup> and off I went to Hamburg.

To make a long story short, I reported to this school that I had already been in a course for some three or four months, and the teacher said: "Well, I wonder whether you can catch up. Let's have look at it."

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<sup>97</sup> Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski (b.1928), political scientist, politician.

<sup>98</sup> Otto Brunner (1898–1982), historian.

<sup>99</sup> Helmut Wilhelm Friedrich Schelsky (1912–84), sociologist.

They were reading Morse code for maritime communication rather slowly. I was used to reading Morse five times as fast in the army. So that was no problem. The rest of it were technical and legal matters. You know that the basic thing one really learns in secondary school and at university is to study something that they put in front of you. I said: "Well, give me the books I have to study." Since Morse was no problem, I studied the other books. After four months or so I finished and got my certificate as, of course, the first of the class. I was offered a job right away by the Hamburg-Chicago Line on the MS *Desdemona*, about to sail across the Atlantic and up to Chicago. It was a rather small boat, because the canals in Canada were not yet as huge as they are now. The first trip all the way up across the Great Lakes was very beautiful.

**GK:** *How long did this boat trip take?*

**JMB:** I was on board ship for two or three months. We would stop and load, unload, etc. I saw Canada and the United States for the first time, had a few free days in America, and could even visit my uncle in New York.

Additionally, I got a German passport, because the Hamburg-Chicago Line did not want to get into trouble because of a crew member with a refugee passport. And since passports were issued by the member states of the Federal Republic, the Hanseatic city of Hamburg could decide that it was in the German interest to grant me a temporary passport on the request of a shipping company. I got a regular passport and the citizenship a year later.

**GK:** *Did your university degree play a role in this?*

**JMB:** No, I do not think so. The important thing was that it was of "national interest." I did not have very much to do on board of the ship; there were relatively few tasks for the radio operator. I enjoyed very much that I could read Morse code fast. The Hamburger Abendblatt was sent over every day in Morse code, and I passed it on to other ships—some of their radio operators being former classmates from the Maritime School—by telephony.

**GK:** *What year are we now?*

**JMB:** We are now in summer and fall of 1959.

**GK:** *Did you already have your PhD by then?*

**JMB:** No, I got my PhD in 1960. I was typing my dissertation on board the ship, since as a radio operator I had an old typewriter, and sent the chapters from different ports to Percy Schramm. I was told that he was showing them around: "I have a pupil who is officer in the christliche Seefahrt sending me his dissertation from ports of call." As a Hamburger he liked having a sailor among his pupils.

I was fortunate; after this one round trip, the boat was chartered by another company to make a number of trips from Bremerhaven to Dakar and back. In such a case the crew could sign off without penalty for breaking a contract. With the exception of the captain, who was near retirement, the whole crew signed off, and I gave up my escape from academia and went back to Göttingen. Then I completed my dissertation,<sup>100</sup> submitted it, defended it, and obtained my PhD in medieval and modern history, with minors in Eastern European history with Reinhard Wittram<sup>101</sup> and sociology with Helmut Plessner,<sup>102</sup> on July 20, 1960.

There is no public defense of the dissertation in Germany, only an oral examination in the three fields. The oral examination with your thesis supervisor is always funny; as we know from our own practice: the *Doktorvater* had asked all the questions he ever wanted from his student during the years of postgraduate study. Schramm was breaking his head over what we could talk about and asked: "Is there such a thing as medieval Romanian history?" I tried to tell him as much as I knew about the principalities. Then, for a modern subject, he wanted to talk about Empress Elisabeth—Sissi, the wife of Francis Joseph I. With Wittram we discussed Peter the Great, which had been the subject of his seminar in the years I was attending it.

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<sup>100</sup> Published as *Königtum und Stände in Ungarn im 14.–16. Jahrhundert* (Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des östlichen Europa, Hrsg. Manfred Hellmann, 6) (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1973).

<sup>101</sup> Reinhard Wittram (1902–73), historian.

<sup>102</sup> Helmut Plessner (1892–1985), sociologist.

I liked Wittram and a good number of other Baltic Germans—Manfred Hellmann,<sup>103</sup> Paul Johansen,<sup>104</sup> and few others. They were much more open-minded and cosmopolitan than their generation within the Reich. Wittram was one of the very few who tried to explain with courage and honesty—but not excuse—how he fell into the trap of National Socialism and that he regretted, deeply and for a lifetime, having been part of the murderous regime. He, as few others, turned away from it with the help of Christianity. They embraced Christian values and that helped them face what they had done.

With Plessner we had a very pleasant examination. He was the rector of the Georgia Augusta University and had no time on the day of my exam: “Could we have your exam in the rectorate a day before?” I replied: “We can do that, but if you ask something I don’t know, I should have the right to say that I would have learned that overnight.” Agreed! We had a good conversation about Protestantism’s political role in Central Europe, being in opposition to the Catholic monarchies and thus acquiring a national and oppositional quality.

**GK:** *How did you end up in Great Britain after this?*

**JMB:** I had applied for a scholarship in Great Britain already a few months earlier. I wanted to improve my rather poor English and to meet and consult with Walter Ullmann, the English counterpart of Schramm, in Cambridge. But the British Council put me into the box of “East Europeans,” and those were to go to St. Anthony’s College, Oxford, a center of Russian, Eastern European studies, and kremlinology. So I ended up there—a very nice place where I spent the following two years.

**GK:** *Did you get a scholarship for two years there?*

**JMB:** In fact, it was a one-year scholarship extendable for another year, more or less automatically. Fellows were registered at the university for

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<sup>103</sup> Manfred Hellmann (1912–92), historian.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Johansen (1902–65), historian.

a so-called “M. Phil. Course,” leading to a PhD; so I could have obtained an Oxford degree, had I stayed there. To the subject of the college I contributed, altogether, I think, two papers on the 1956 Revolution and its background. Otherwise, what they were doing was of no great interest to me. And since the communication from Oxford to Cambridge by bus or train was almost impossible—for who would go from one to the other once you are at the “right place”—it was quite difficult to get to Ullmann. Still, I visited him maybe two or three times, had some good conversations with him, and realized that he was much more legal-minded than what I was interested in. But it was during these visits that a lifelong friendship began with a then-research student or maybe a fresh graduate of his, Jinty Nelson.

**GK:** *What did you gain from this stay in Great Britain?*

**JMB:** The Oxford years were useful. I really learned reasonably good English, although I never managed the real Oxonian way of speaking without opening your mouth. And I made a few good friends, Americans and others. I was also introduced to Sir Isaiah Berlin,<sup>105</sup> because he was a fellow of St. Anthony’s College, and had a few very nice conversations with him about life in Eastern Europe. He was also the supervisor of my highly esteemed friend Miklós Krassó,<sup>106</sup> who wrote or rather was supposed to write his dissertation with him. Miklós never put a single line on paper and died very young in London. I am glad to have been his friend: He was an extraordinary man, probably a genius, but unable to adjust to real life. Two or three of the Americans I met later at the University of Iowa taught there, and they brought me together with the star pupil of Kantorowicz, Ralph Giesey, from whom I learned a lot.

After two years in Oxford I came back to Germany, with a two-year grant from the German Research Foundation, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, to make a book out of my dissertation. Those years were more or less overlapping with my work in Brussels during the last

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<sup>105</sup> Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), philosopher.

<sup>106</sup> Miklós Krassó (1930–86), philosopher.



years of the Imre Nagy Institute, and I spent quite some time there. And I had my first contacts with the German medieval establishment. It was still in Oxford when I was first invited to the meeting of the Konstanzer Arbeitskreis on medieval rural communities in Reichenau at the famous monastery of St. Gall. I gave a paper on early Hungarian rural communities, very aggressively protesting against the idea of communal fields—the *Mark*—as imagined by Engels, who learned it from the Historische Rechtsschule. I must confess, I unfortunately disregarded the material that Károly Tagányi and others had brought together, not of an ancient communism, but communal agriculture owing to the state of agricultural technology of that time. There is plenty of evidence of fields *mixtim* (mixed), divided by shooting an arrow every year. But I was more interested in debunking the Marxist misinterpretation than seriously looking at the sources. But, since nobody there knew better, the badly biased paper was published.<sup>107</sup>

**GK:** *So that was your entry into the German medievalist establishment? And to rural studies, to peasant studies?*

**JMB:** In fact, the latter came much later. That Konstanzer Arbeitskreis was a very impressive experience. I did not know much about its political background; that it had started out as a gathering of the professors who had been kicked out of the postwar universities as Nazis, like Theodor Mayer,<sup>108</sup> Rudolf Buchner,<sup>109</sup> and their company. By that time, the year is now 1962–63, the leadership of the Arbeitskreis was in the hands of medievalists who managed to remain in academia—even though they were more or less still ex-Nazis—such as Walter Schlesinger<sup>110</sup> and Helmut Beumann,<sup>111</sup> both from Marburg. But there were a good number of younger colleagues with whom I made

107 János M. Bak, “Zur Frühgeschichte ungarischer Landgemeinden,” in *Die Anfänge der Landgemeinde und ihr Wesen*, ed. by Theodor Mayer, vol. 1, Vorträge und Forschungen 8 (Constance: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1964), 404–17.

108 Theodor Mayer (1883–1972), historian.

109 Rudolf Buchner (1908–85), historian.

110 Walter Friedrich Schlesinger (1908–84), historian.

111 Helmut Beumann (1912–95), historian.

friends, even if I was a bit older than them. We were sitting in the back and laughing at the stiff style of everyone else. The Konstanzer Arbeitskreis was by that time already the leading forum of medieval scholarship in Germany.

**GK:** *Did you have a position in Germany at that moment?*

**JMB:** At that point I still held a scholarship. Then, even before the scholarship ran out in 1963 or 1964, I was offered an assistant professorship (wissenschaftlicher Assistent); this time again outside of medieval studies, at the Institute for Eastern European history, chaired by Peter Scheibert,<sup>112</sup> a friend of Percy Schramm.

**GK:** *Where was it?*

**JMB:** In Marburg. And my colleague there was nobody else but Schramm's son, Gottfried—Götz<sup>113</sup> to his friends. There, I was supposed to do modern history; I was expected to work on a book on the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 for my habilitation. I published some archival material on that: the exchange of telegrams between the Hungarian communist commissars and their Soviet Russian counterparts.<sup>114</sup> I was, among other things, impressed by the otherworldliness of intellectuals—Comrade Lunacharsky<sup>115</sup> on the one end and Comrade Lukács on the other—surrounded by armed intervention, total misery on both sides, and terror, white and red alike, cabling about progressive kindergarten arrangements in the Soviet regime.

Actually, my first official Hungarian contact from Germany was with the Institute for Party History, whence I requested microfilms of these exchanges, some of them published, some not, and got them without any trouble. That was the time after the partial amnesty of 1963 of the “1956ers,” when my friend Litván also got out of jail.

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<sup>112</sup> Peter Scheibert (1905–95), historian.

<sup>113</sup> Gottfried Schramm (b.1929), historian.

<sup>114</sup> János M. Bak, “Aus dem Telegrammwechsel zwischen Moskau und Budapest, März–August 1919,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 19 (1971): 187–224.

<sup>115</sup> Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky (1875–1933), writer, politician.

So I was supposed to do something on the Hungarian Soviet Republic and its connections to Moscow and Munich—the short-lived Soviet republic. Otherwise, one of the research projects at the institute was not too far from my former interest in workers' councils; it was on the *fabzavkomi*, the factory councils in the February and the October Russian revolutions. But I was not happy with the idea of writing about 1919. I realized that, at that time in Germany, they would expect a kind of rabidly anticommunist attitude. Now, I did not intend to defend the serious mistakes and the unfounded violence of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but I would not have been prepared to write a kind of aggressive anticommunist text appropriate to the Cold War. From the exchanges with Moscow, I realized that much of what was entirely wrong both in internal and external policies of the Hungarian commissars, was to a great extent due to that unfounded revolutionary optimism that the Third International fed them. My hesitation helped me out of trouble. To my good luck it became known that Rudolf Tőkés<sup>116</sup> was about to publish a book on the Hungarian Soviet Republic in America. This news relieved me from the unpleasant task. It was not a very good book but more or less covered the information available at that point. Rather soon, however in Hungary, it was possible for Tibor Hajdú<sup>117</sup> to write a decent book about the Soviet Republic without very much censorship. We became good friends later.

**GK:** *You did not know each other in Hungary?*

**JMB:** With Tibor, no. I did not know him before.

**GK:** *In spite of his friendship with Litván and being of the same generation?*

**JMB:** Well, yes, but I think he was just a year or two later at the university than I, and I do not know where he was before we met at the in-

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<sup>116</sup> Rudolf L. Tokes (Tőkés) (b.1935), historian, author of *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic: The Origins and Role of the Communist Party of Hungary in the Revolutions of 1918–1919* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1967).

<sup>117</sup> Tibor Hajdú (b. 1930), historian.

stitute in the 1970s, where he shared an office—and a number of publications—with my friend Litván.

Back to Marburg, where at that time I was doing Eastern European and modern history but also attended the Konstanzer Arbeitskreis regularly, and later gave a decent paper on the financial, economic and other resources of the Hungarian monarchy in the late Middle Ages.<sup>118</sup> However, the political situation became increasingly unpleasant at German universities. For example, Götz Schramm and I held a proseminar together, and we did something—again my obsession with teaching—that we would be doing much later at the Central European University for years, namely, that we took the students to the university library, discussed how the library worked, and altogether tried to introduce them to hands-on research. But then Schlesinger and company said that Bak and Schramm were spending the class time on teaching students to fill out library slips. “This is well known to us,” they said. “That’s what is done in the GDR.” On the other hand, the crazy so-called Left started to emerge and attack people as “traitors of the revolutionary movement,” particularly people like myself and my friends around Wolfgang Abendroth,<sup>119</sup> a refugee from Leipzig, a very fine post-Marxist, and critical Marxist scholar. Peter Scheibert and many of the old professors moved to the other radical end and became the founders of the professors’ defense league of the traditional, hierarchical university. A break was more or less inevitable.

With additional private reasons behind it, I became interested in going to America and having a look at the universities there, which offered itself as an obvious alternative to the out-of-date world of German academia. So I was trying to find out how one could do that. In the Marburg Institute we had several American guests whom I befriended: Oswald Backus<sup>120</sup> from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, and above all Hans Rogger,<sup>121</sup> a German-American who had

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118 János M. Bak, “Monarchie im Wellental: Materielle Grundlagen des ungarischen Königtums im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert,” in *Das spätmittelalterliche Königtum im europäischen Vergleich*, ed. Reinhard Schneider (Sigmarinen: Jan Thorbecke, 1987), 347–84.

119 Wolfgang Abendroth (1906–85), political scientist.

120 Oswald P. Backus III (1921–72), historian.

121 Hans Rogger (1923–2002), historian.

managed to move his parents to America with great difficulty before things became bad—as late as 1936, I think. The parents were German Jews: “We won’t go away, this is our country, and all of this will pass away.” It did not—this reminded me of the Budapest “Jews.” Hans became a leading scholar of Russian history at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was he who arranged that I got an invitation to a minor university on the East Coast, the University of Delaware, in a small town called Newark, where Walter Kirchner<sup>122</sup> was professor of European history. Kirchner was a good economic historian, wrote about the Baltic trade, but then became a textbook author, with which he earned quite good money. Kirchner arranged that I was invited for one or two years to the University of Delaware and saw a state university in real life.

**GK:** *Was that the moment when you decided to move to America?*

**JMB:** No, I just wanted to have a look at it for a couple of years or so.

**GK:** *You still had a family in Germany.*

**JMB:** Well, once my wife in Hungary decided not to try to follow me and procured a divorce, I married a former pupil of mine in Germany in 1964. Alas, that marriage was falling apart—one more thing that gave me a reason to leave, at least temporarily. In September 1966, I arrived in New York, received there by nobody else but George Heltai, who told me what an American university looked like, because he had been there already for three years, about the first surprises of what is called “university” over there, and what was expected from a professor.

I enjoyed my years in Newark. As I liked teaching, I did not mind the general course on European civilization (“From Adam to Adenauer”), but I could offer some special courses on medieval subjects for interested students as well. The majority of the undergraduates had rather poor educational background, black and white and yellow and all kinds of people, but they wanted to learn, and I had a good time.

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<sup>122</sup> Walter Kirchner (1905–2004), historian.

## **Times of Upheaval**

I spent long weekends or other free times mostly driving up to New York to the Heltais and other friends, among them my ex-professor Sándor Szalai. At Delaware, I became acquainted with the progressive movements there: the civil rights groups, the “Students for Democratic Society,” and the anti-Vietnam War protest, at that point still rather different from the headless anarchism in Germany.

To extend my invitation and visitor’s visa for a second year was no problem. When the second year passed, according to my visa, I had to leave for at least two years before being able to come back. But at that time the situation in America started to get uglier; I realized that I was inevitably involved, because if I failed somebody in an exam, he might lose his deferment of call-up and be sent to Vietnam; now, I did not want to participate in that.

So I was thinking about going back to Germany but there, hell had broken loose at that point. That was the high time of the student unrest with quite radical tones. We are now in 1968. There was the great upheaval in France for democracy and reform, but in Germany, due to the establishment being seen at the same time not only as repressive and outdated, but also as ex-Nazi—with good reason—it became anarchistic and over-radical. The so-called Left slid into the tone of the Cultural Revolution in Mao’s China, with calls to burn down the libraries containing the oppressive bourgeois (or Nazi) books.

**GK:** *Who was planning to do that in Germany?*

**JMB:** Well, some of the radicalized students.

**GK:** *The extreme Left?*

**JMB:** I do not agree that it was indeed Left; I think that it was just the frustration of a generation that was well off but did not know what better to do. The French movement of 68 and the American anti-war movement were distorted in the German milieu, where the matter of how to handle the Nazi past had not yet been placed on the agenda.

**GK:** *Yes, I know that was an issue in Germany.*

**JMB:** Well, indeed, a good part of professors and other civil servants were ex-Nazis, so there was well-founded irritation even for democrats, but there was no mechanism for how to handle that, so the young people just wanted to overthrow everything. However, occupying the universities without knowing where to go from there led only to confrontations. So I did not want to go back there and started looking for a job in Canada at the American Historical Association's annual meeting.

I received two offers, one from Ottawa and one from Vancouver, British Columbia. I asked my uncle in New York what he thought about Vancouver: "Vancouver...?" For a New Yorker, you know, anything west of the Hudson River is the end of the world. And my American colleagues also knew little about Canadian universities.

I first went to Ottawa to discuss the post, and that was not an inviting situation. On the one hand, it was cold as hell; cars were connected to electric heaters in order not to freeze. But even worse: I was taken to the hospital, where the man whose job I had to inherit was about to die. It was a bit ghostly to meet him and say: "Hi, I am going to take up your job when you konk off." So right away I sent a cable to UBC (University of British Columbia), Vancouver: "Job accepted, please send details." No questions asked, so to say.

**GK:** *This is how you got to Vancouver?*

**JMB:** Yes. For a two-year replacement job, because their medievalist, Father Hanrahan,<sup>123</sup> was elected to some office in his Basilian Order, the Pontifical Institute in Toronto, and they needed a replacement. I was not regretting leaving the United States. When we went to look around for housing in April 1968, preparing for the move, it was the day Martin Luther King was shot. On the way back, driving from Chicago to Delaware, we saw the ghettos burning in Chicago, Detroit, and Wilmington, Delaware, with the National Guard in full force. I was glad to get away from that.

I landed in Vancouver for a two-year job without knowing what to do thereafter. I had some job offers from Lawrence, in Kansas, and

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123 Thomas James Hanrahan CSB (1926–2012), historian.

Philadelphia as future possibilities. A year was not yet over when Father Hanrahan told me: "My beloved brethren will not let me off this administrative job for quite a while, so you can keep the position if you want." So two years became twenty-five, the largest part of my professional life.

**GK:** *What precisely was your job there?*

**JMB:** At UBC I did not have to do much outside the Middle Ages, so my moving in and out of medieval studies was over for quite a long time. When I got to Vancouver, there were still those elegant academic appointments when you could present your wishes to the dean: so and so much for the library, some kind of research possibilities, and other support. I did not know yet what that support would be; it was only a few years later that the idea of a workshop every fall came up, inviting people from America and Europe, so that our students and colleagues at the "end of the world" could see what was going on elsewhere in the profession. By that time, we had hired Richard Unger,<sup>124</sup> a young economic historian with whom we started this project and were supported by a good number of medievalists. We had a medieval roundtable, having lunch together every month or so.

**GK:** *Who else was there?*

**JMB:** Besides the historians, there was Hanna Kassis,<sup>125</sup> my friend in religious studies, a student of the Koran and Muslim Spain; there were Italianists and Hispanicists, a good number of Middle English colleagues, also a good medieval art historian, a medieval Latinist...

**GK:** *So it was quite a group.*

**JMB:** Yes, and in the History Department we were quite strong too, with an English medieval history scholar, Jean Elder,<sup>126</sup> Dick Unger, and my-

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<sup>124</sup> Richard W. Unger (b.1935), historian.

<sup>125</sup> Hanna Kassis (b. c.1935), Islamicist.

<sup>126</sup> Jean Elder (b. c.1933), historian.



self; also, Fritz Lehmann,<sup>127</sup> a Muslim historian, and some colleagues who studied the later “ancient regime” with an interest in the Middle Ages. It was not the godforsaken corner that I had feared it would be.

We started then what became most rewarding during my Vancouver years: the annual medieval workshop, of which we have organized twenty in the course of my time and brought over friends and colleagues from Europe, like yourself and Erik Fügedi from Budapest, Heide Wunder<sup>128</sup> from Hamburg, Armin Wolf<sup>129</sup> from Frankfurt, and many more. Then we heard of a young man whom Unger knew from Yale, who had been left out of a job in Princeton and was on fellowship in Paris, with a recently published book on relics, by the name of Patrick Geary.<sup>130</sup> We invited him in cooperation with the University of Montreal, and he remained my very good friend to this day.

**GK:** *Now, we enter this new chapter: North American medieval studies in Vancouver. How did you feel in this new context? What were your first impressions?*

**JMB:** As usual, I was most interested in what one can teach there about medieval Europe, so far away in space and time from their Canadian present. For many years we rode on the high wave of naïve interest in the Middle Ages; young people in the 1960s and 70s, dissatisfied with the mindless consumer society of their age, imagining that the long-lost past, medieval Europe, was still a human and “whole, sane world” and wanting to know more about it. Even if we did not cater to this dream, they wanted to hear about it.

At UBC, we offered a second-year, two-semester, interdisciplinary team-taught course on “Medieval Studies,” which always had a good number of students, about eighty to a hundred every year. A fair number of them, who remained interested in the subject, we sent to study source languages, and then we could do some serious work with them in their third and fourth years.

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<sup>127</sup> Fritz Lehman (1936–94), historian.

<sup>128</sup> Heide Wunder (b.1939), historian.

<sup>129</sup> Armin Wolf (b.1935), historian.

<sup>130</sup> Patrick Geary (b.1948), historian.

At UBC we also had a program called “BA Honors.” Since there rarely was a full graduate program in European history, as there were only very few MA or PhD candidates to add up to a good graduate seminar, the BA Honors was what most of our good students in medieval studies took—I had merely a dozen MAs and only three PhDs in all those years. In Canadian history and also in modern European and Chinese history there were very good professors and fine graduate students. I liked to do the BA Honors seminars in the third and the fourth year.

Rather soon we found out that there were medievalists in the neighborhood. In the Medieval Association of the Pacific we were active participants. It met mostly in California, but occasionally they came up to Vancouver. It was an impressive company; we met people there from the University of California, Los Angeles and Berkeley, medievalists like Robert Brentano,<sup>131</sup> Lynn White,<sup>132</sup> Andy Kelly,<sup>133</sup> and the people from the school of medieval rhetoric, Jim Murphy<sup>134</sup> and his students at UC Davis. Thus, I realized that there were, besides the rather general “Western civilization” courses, medieval scholars of internationally acclaimed quality. With our workshop we fitted well into that.

I became acquainted with the center in Los Angeles, and my first major American publication was associated with them. When Percy Schramm’s collected works, *Kaiser, Könige und Päpste*,<sup>135</sup> came out in Germany in four volumes, he suggested to me to talk to his American friend Gray Boyce<sup>136</sup> about publishing a review or a review article in order to present Schramm to the English-speaking world.

He was little known there—except for his contemporary history publications—as only his rather superficial book about the history of the English coronation was available in English. It was an occasional piece; Schramm was invited to the coronation of King George VI, and

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<sup>131</sup> Robert J. Brentano (1926–2002), historian.

<sup>132</sup> Lynn T. White, Jr. (1907–67), historian.

<sup>133</sup> Henry Ansgar (Andy) Kelly (b.1934), literary historian.

<sup>134</sup> James J. Murphy (b.1928), historian of rhetoric.

<sup>135</sup> Percy Ernst Schramm, *Kaiser, Könige und Päpste: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Geschichte des Mittelalters*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1968–71).

<sup>136</sup> Gray Boyce (1899–1981), historian.

quickly put together a small book.<sup>137</sup> His dating of the coronation *ordines* and some other points were rather soon proven wrong or problematic, but still it remained his only translated book.

I got all his available publications from Hiersemann, Stuttgart—which, of course, I had mostly read long before—and started to work on an article. That led to the plan to conduct a professional interview with him, like what we are doing now, less on his biography, which was well known, than on his ideas and views on his medieval work. However, we did not manage to sit down and talk, because of my being in Canada and his being busy with both scholarship and politics. So we did an interview in writing: I put five or six questions down for him to which he was to reply in writing. It worked out very nicely and we agreed to continue, but his last letter came just a month or so before he fell unexpectedly ill and died. But, on the basis of that and...

**GK:** *How old was he at this point?*

**JMB:** He was just in his mid-seventies.

**GK:** *So he was not very old.*

**JMB:** He was not an ancient person, not at all, and still very active. I had to write the article on the basis of my reading and the short interview. It came out in the still young journal of UCLA, *Viator*, edited by Lynn White and Richard Rouse,<sup>138</sup> whom I knew from Oxford. It was about the methodology of Schramm and his approach to political symbology.<sup>139</sup> It was appropriate that I wrote such a summary, as I was one of the last medievalist pupils of Schramm.

**GK:** *Who else was a student of Schramm?*

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<sup>137</sup> Percy Ernst Schramm, *A History of the English Coronation*, trans. Leopold G. Wickham Legg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

<sup>138</sup> Richard H Rouse (b.1940), historian, codicologist.

<sup>139</sup> János M. Bak, "Medieval Symbology of the State: Percy E. Schramm's Contribution," *Viator* 4 (1973): 33–63.

**JMB:** A good number of medievalists, quite a lot. The first was the mother of our friend Niethard Bulst,<sup>140</sup> Marie Luise Bulst-Thiele,<sup>141</sup> historian of the Templars, who earned her doctorate in 1934; then Berent Schwineköper,<sup>142</sup> author of the important study on the symbolism of the gauntlet; and Wilhelm Berges,<sup>143</sup> best known for his book on *Fürstenspiegel*, both in 1938. After the war, Schramm's best-known medievalist pupils were Peter Classen<sup>144</sup> (1950), Arno Borst<sup>145</sup> (1953), and Norbert Kamp<sup>146</sup> (1957), among the ever-increasing number of historians of the twentieth century and the Third Reich who came to study with him as the former keeper of the war diary.

**GK:** *Yes, I know.*

**JMB:** I understand that he ended up there, for his friends kind of rescued him to be in the army when the Gestapo was already looking for him. His wife, née von Thadden,<sup>147</sup> was related to oppositional officers, the men who tried to kill Hitler on July 20. Thus, Schramm became the keeper of the *Kriegstagebuch* of the supreme command of the Wehrmacht for the last two years. Then, against commands, he, following his historian's conscience, rescued that record and published it in the 1950s. Thus, in the seminar for doctoral students of my time there were almost exclusively people working on the Third Reich and the war.

**GK:** *I see. But let us return to North America.*

**JMB:** A contact of mine in America, well before UCLA, was Kalamazoo. I was still in Delaware when I first heard about a conference there. "Kalamazoo?" Everybody was laughing at that, because Kalamazoo

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140 Niethard Bulst (b.1941), historian.

141 Marie Luise Bulst-Thiele (1906–92), historian.

142 Berent Schwineköper (1912–93), historian.

143 Wilhelm Berges (1909–78), historian.

144 Peter Classen (1924–80), historian.

145 Arno Borst (1925–2007), historian.

146 Norbert Kamp (1927–99), historian, first president of Göttingen University.

147 Ehrengard (Eta) Schramm, née von Thadden (1900–85), historian, politician.

was used in American as a commonplace for “the end of the world” or something like that.

But somebody knew about it, maybe somebody at Delaware or in the small circle of medievalists from Pennsylvania, or from the Philadelphia colleagues who met occasionally for discussions. So there I went and was there, I think, in the second year of the conference, which was held in one of the dormitories. There must have been about sixty to eighty people altogether, and beer had to be smuggled in over the window because it was a “dry campus.” I knew only one single person whom I had met in Marburg, a South African art historian, but then he introduced me to few others. So I saw the beginning of Kalamazoo that then grew into the thousands. I attended a few more times, but then not too often from Canada. Particularly not because I liked the University of British Columbia among others since its semester ended in April, so I was free to go to Europe or, for example, to Germany and teach a summer semester there; I did that a few times in Kassel at the *Gesamthochschule*<sup>148</sup> that became then a university. Therefore, Kalamazoo in May was already out of the picture.

Now let me think; what else happened in those years? Well, yes, still during my German time, I was invited by the *Historische Zeitschrift* to write a review article about Hungarian historical scholarship since 1945—which I did very gladly<sup>149</sup> and then felt that it could be a kind of mission to make Hungarian studies known abroad.

**GK:** *The voice of the emigrant.*

**JMB:** Yes. I strived to connect Hungarian research with the “West,” to talk about it, and I also tried to get some information about the world back to Hungary. During the work on my dissertation I made the acquaintance with György Bónis,<sup>150</sup> the legal historian, by correspondence, which then led much later to a long-term cooperation.

<sup>148</sup> Combination of a regular university and a college (1971–2003).

<sup>149</sup> János M. Bak, “Literaturbericht über ungarische Geschichte: Veröffentlichungen 1945–1960”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Sonderband 1 (1962): 123–57.

<sup>150</sup> György Bónis (1914–85), historian of law.

I kept writing reviews of Hungarian publications both in Germany and America, mostly critical—when appropriate—of narrow-minded nationalist perceptions. That many writings were *nolens volens* coated with a Marxist-Leninist sauce that I rather tried to explain from the given conditions. True, by the mid-sixties this began not to be mandatory any more. In this sense, I was glad being able to propose invitations of Hungarian scholars to Germany, to Reichenau, for example. Kubinyi was the first, I think, who could come, then László Mezey.<sup>151</sup> Later, I had the possibility to have books sent to Hungary and then to Czechoslovakia and Russia as well through some German foundation—maybe financed by the Americans?—and many old and new friends profited from that. Finally, in Vancouver I had the chance to invite people from Central Europe to the workshop, as I mentioned.

**GK:** *Let us now get back to Canada for another round. Did you feel at home there in those decades?*

**JMB:** Well, my stay there did not look totally final for a while. I tried twice to get back to Germany, and both times I failed because of my political “middle of the road” course. In those times one did not apply for a position, but was proposed, “ins Gespräch gebracht” (spoken about), and then invited for presentation. If approved, then *berufen*, that is, invited to the post.

**GK:** *Yes, the name also tells the mechanism.*

**JMB:** I was invited to Bremen, at that point a most politicized place.

**GK:** *When was that?*

**JMB:** In 1970–71 or something like that. I arrived at the hotel and right away was phoned by students from the Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Maoist Committee or whatever. If I would follow their proposals, they would vote for me. There was a very strong student representation,

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<sup>151</sup> László Mezey (1918–84), literary historian.

I think: the same number of students as professors in the hiring committees. I said: "What would you like to have?" "Well, certainly not that kind of Leninist thing but the Maoist line of teaching." "Yes," I said, "well, thank you very much." Then a few young men showed up, maybe from the Fourth International, assuring me that they would vote if I did not join the Maoists, and so on. I left without even saying goodbye.

**GK:** *Were they really putting that type of ideological pressure on the professor candidates?*

**JMB:** Absolutely! Absolutely! So I pretty soon realized that, under the given conditions, they wanted to have a Marxist-Leninist basic seminar that I used to give a hundred years before that, but I was not quite interested in doing it again.

**GK:** *Well, this would have been a funny twist of history in the post-1968 years.*

**JMB:** The project was defeated by my not being far left enough. A few years later, or just a year later, my friend Manfred Hellmann in Münster retired, and he would have liked me to follow him. So the Münsterians invited me. I gave a good paper; at that point I was interested in another subject, in peasant studies, so I spoke about peasant uprisings in Central Europe, Dózsa<sup>152</sup> and others.

I felt that I was having a fair chance to be offered the job, although I heard that they wanted a more Slavic-oriented historian. Then, in the evening, I was picked up by Professor Ferluga,<sup>153</sup> a Slovenian and old friend of Hellmann's, for a walk. He said: "I suspect that you would not be happy living here." At that time, Münster was a very conservative, stiff-shirt Catholic university—that was long ago; now it is a very different place. I realized that I really would not want to go there; by that time, I had become already too much American; and anyhow, as a kind of liberal social democrat I would not fit in.

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<sup>152</sup> György Dózsa (d.1514), leader of peasant war in Hungary.

<sup>153</sup> Jadran Ferluga (1920–2004), Slavicist, historian.

**GK:** *So that was not an opposition on his part, but rather some friendly advice.*

**JMB:** Yes, it was an advice of a friend to a friend. That was the last of my attempts to go back to Germany, and by that time I was well settled in Vancouver, busy organizing the workshops and so on.

Soon, I had other projects. In Berlin, I met Heinz Quirin<sup>154</sup> and had the idea, exactly from the experience of teaching in America, that his book, an introduction to medieval studies,<sup>155</sup> could be updated, transformed, and brought out in English. At that time there was no such handbook in America—a few years later a less systematic one was published—so I was looking for someone more English than I was to join me to do that.

I do not remember how, probably through Oxford friends, I found Denis Bethell<sup>156</sup> in Dublin, and in 1980 we started the translation of Quirin's *Einführung*. I spent a sabbatical with him in Dublin, and my back froze off in a kind of Irish-English type of turf-heated, beautiful apartment, but we got a nice piece of the job done. I was supposed to come back the following year and complete it. A pile of typewritten pages—there was no computer or word-processor yet—was waiting for me to continue. However, during the year I was away, Denis fell ill and died. God knows what happened to the typescripts. By chance, one chapter about manuscripts was with me, which I have used here at CEU; I put it into a handbook of ours for introductory courses and recently published it online—and finally in paperback.<sup>157</sup> It was a project by which I hoped to contribute to teaching in medieval studies—my concern then and ever since. Finally, however, not all was lost, because Quirin's book contained a chronological table of sources. Those I updated, expanded, and published in 1987—and now, once again updated and very much expanded, last year in a book, augmented by a few essays on chronicles.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Heinz Quirin (1923–2000), historian.

<sup>155</sup> Heinz Quirin, *Einführung in das Studium der mittelalterlichen Geschichte* (Braunschweig: Westermann, 1950 and seven later editions).

<sup>156</sup> Denis T. L. Bethell (1934–81), historian.

<sup>157</sup> Now in paperback as János M. Bak, *An Introduction to Working with Manuscripts for Medievalists* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).

<sup>158</sup> János M. Bak, *Medieval Narrative Sources: A Chronological Guide (With a List of Major Letter Collections)*, Garland reference library of the humanities 734, with the ass. of H. Quirin and P.



Another project that fell into my lap a few years later, in the mid-1980s, was more successful. Its prehistory goes back to the 1960s. At that time, a young American legal historian with an interest in Hungary, James Ross Sweeney<sup>159</sup> from Pennsylvania State University, came to visit me in Marburg and asked for guidance in Hungarian matters. He was a pupil of Brian Tierney<sup>160</sup> and at that time Humboldt scholar in Germany. I recommended him to György Bónis, as the best legal historian in Hungary I knew.

Around 1985, Bónis was asked by a strange American gentleman, Charles Schlacks,<sup>161</sup> devoted servant of Slavic and Eastern European studies and single-handed publisher of journals and books for the last forty to fifty years, to prepare an edition and translation of medieval Hungarian laws. (Schlacks had the plan to publish the laws of Eastern European countries, medieval and modern, in bilingual editions—besides our medieval series and a couple of volumes of the *Russkaya Pravda*, nothing came of the plan.) However, Bónis realized that he needed some help and turned to Jim Sweeney, whom I had introduced to him some years before. Jim saw that Bónis could not do the job; he may have been a valuable adviser, but not an editor or translator. Therefore, he de facto took over and then asked me to join him, which I gladly did.

The first volume of the *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae: The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary* came out in 1989, the fifth and last in 2013.<sup>162</sup> With that, I was back to my favorite enterprise: reading and translating Latin, however contorted and poor that legal language may have been. It was quite a challenge to find appropriate

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Hollingsworth (New York: Garland, 1987); in German, János M. Bak, *Mittelalterliche Geschichtsquellen in chronologischer Übersicht, nebst einer Auswahl von Briefsammlungen* with the ass. of H. Quirin and P. Hollingsworth (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1987); most recently, János M. Bak and Ivan Jurković, *Chronicon—Medieval Narrative Sources: A Chronological Guide with Introductory Essays*, Brepols Essays in European Culture 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

159 James Ross Sweeney (1940–2011), historian.

160 Brian Tierney (b.1922), historian.

161 Charles Schlacks, Jr. (b.1926), Slavist, publisher.

162 János M. Bak, György Bónis and James Ross Sweeney, eds., *The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary: Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae*, vols. 1–3 (Bakersfield, CA: Schlacks, 1989–96); János M. Bak, Péter Banyo, and Martyn Rady, eds., *The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary: Decreta Regni Mediaevalis Hungariae*, vols. 4–5 (Idyllwild, CA: Schlacks, 2005–12).

wording for peculiar Hungarian-Latin terms and notions and add annotations for an international readership. Sweeney was involved only for the first two volumes, but then Pál Engel joined me. We became very close friends until his very end—actually, I visited him with a pupil of ours the very day before his death. The subsequent volumes also had coeditors from Hungary and America; in fact, young Hungarian colleagues assisted me from the very beginning. In the last years, historians from England introduced to us by my friend László Péter and his successor at the School of Slavonic Studies, Martyn Rady,<sup>163</sup> also participated with great interest. It was a pleasure to work with them and learn a lot on legal history. We completed the final volumes with the help of students from CEU.

The five volumes of the *Decreta regni mediaevalis Hungariae* were my basic work over a quarter of a century. The Hungarian legal and historical establishment received it with loud silence—*Anglica non leguntur?*—but the younger generation is using it and commenting on it. They, with my pupils from CEU, will do the digital edition, just now in preparation. As long as I am able, I am also working on it.

Besides these projects, new avenues of medieval studies opened up to me; I did not stick to kings and crowns, laws and politics.

**GK:** *But let us return to the 1970s. You are in Vancouver, and you are a historian who came from Germany; so you bring with you all the networks and all the problems of the old continent to a new place, to North America, and you are also already frequently going back to Eastern Europe and making contact also with your former intellectual homeland. This means that at least three different traditions were in your hands. In addition, in the 1970s you were witnessing a renewal of the whole historical craft and especially of medieval history: the ascent of the French “nouvelle histoire” and historical anthropology. So let me ask you, since I know that you have always been concerned with methodological novelties and also with problems that occupy medievalists or historians in general: Which new topics did you embark upon in those years? In what projects were you interested? How did you feel in this “in-between” or mediator position?*

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<sup>163</sup> Martyn Rady (b.1955), historian.

**JMB:** Well, first of all, as I was a teacher, the first challenges were much less the general historical climate but above all those coming from my students.

**GK:** *Were they all Canadians?*

**JMB:** Well, Canadians, Americans, some of them from abroad, new immigrants or whatever. They made it clear that they would like to hear about the history from below, the history of those they had not been told about during their high school history classes—which were obviously about kings and battles—and challenged me to speak about women and heretics and peasants and those who were not in the old text books. So that was one of the main reasons for me to look into all these aspects instead of my interest in kings and noble estates. I started to offer seminars and even lecture courses about these subjects that were then ever more accessible. Worldwide publications came out about heretics, women, children, and old people. Many historians were working on related topics. It was then that my old tutor Éva H. Balázs pointed out to me that a young man by the name of Gábor Klaniczay was writing about “Cathars and weavers,” and sent me something about that.

However, I soon realized that for doing anything serious or publishing about heretics I was not well enough qualified in the theological and related matters, but the peasant aspect challenged me. By coincidence, there was an anniversary of the Hungarian peasant uprising of 1514 that brought about new publications in Hungary, partially still old-fashioned, but some quite new things as well. There appeared, for example, a few articles in which Jenő Szűcs pointed out the connections between Franciscan mendicants and peasant discontent.<sup>164</sup> Soon thereafter came the anniversary of the German peasant war of 1525, which was known to me from my “Marxist” times—as you remember, we were quizzing Professor Váczy on whether he had read Engels. Well, I was reading it at that time and thought that it was the Holy Bi-

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<sup>164</sup> Jenő Szűcs, “A ferences obszervancia és az 1514. évi parasztháború: Egy kódex tanúsága” [Franciscan observance and the Peasant War of 1514: A testimony of a codex], *Levéltári Közlemények* 43 (1972); and a few more articles on the subject.

ble of Marxist history. Now I started rereading it and realized that while it was an excellent piece of political rhetoric for 1850, when Engels wrote it, it has no value whatsoever for medieval history.

I came into contact with the *Journal of Peasant Studies* first, I believe, via a PhD student of mine whom I had sent for a few semesters to Rodney Hilton<sup>165</sup> in Birmingham and his friends in London. At that time, it was a kind of post-Marxist but very open-minded company, and I volunteered to bring out a special issue on the German peasant war. Doing that, I made contact with historians working on peasant studies, attended meetings in London, and became interested in the subject. The special issue—later published as a book, too—also had a chapter on the book of Friedrich Engels, a rather critical assessment.<sup>166</sup>

While reading the literature on medieval peasantry, both Marxist and non-Marxist, I noticed that the notion of serfdom was used in a rather uncritical manner. Just as with the *Landgemeinde* paper many years before, but this time better prepared, I was concerned with clarifying something that had been mixed-up, mainly in the Marxist discourse. So I wrote a short critical piece on “serfs,” based on a paper I had given in Binghamton, NY, at the then up-and-coming school of Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>167</sup> I was pleased to find out that Susan Reynolds,<sup>168</sup> author of an important book on “feudalism,” noticed it and maybe referred to it. We became good friends; she even spent a semester with us in Budapest many years later.

The connection between mendicants, the Reformation, and the peasant war intrigued me, and together with Gerhard Benecke<sup>169</sup> from Canterbury we brought out a volume of studies on religion and rural revolt, including issues of rural revolt and Islam, Russian peasant up-

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165 Rodney Hilton (1916–2002), historian.

166 János M. Bak, “‘The Peasant War in Germany’ by Friedrich Engels – 125 Years After,” in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, Library of peasant studies 3 (London: Cass, 1976), 89–98; Originally a special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 3 (1975).

167 János M. Bak, “Of Words and Things: Serfs and Serfdom in Feudal Europe,” *Review* (Binghamton, ed. I. Wallerstein) 4, no. 3 (1980): 1–12.

168 Susan Reynolds (b.1929), historian; Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

169 Gerhard Benecke (1943–85), historian.

risings and old believers, and suchlike.<sup>170</sup> I learned a lot and made very interesting acquaintances. I believe I met Aron Gurevich<sup>171</sup> for the first time when I was in Moscow to discuss the participation of scholars from there in that volume. It became a great friendship that lasted as long as he lived. I also translated—together with a Slavist colleague—one of his books<sup>172</sup> and had exciting discussions with him about “popular religiosity.”

**GK:** *That was quite a global enterprise.*

**JMB:** Indeed.

**GK:** *Actually, Vancouver, I think, provided you with a good position to be able to embrace a kind of global history at the same time as European history.*

**JMB:** In that sense yes, of course. You are at the Pacific Rim looking towards Asia being just as close as Europe, in a way almost closer than Europe.

**GK:** *Exactly. Let me ask you: When did you take up contact with Jenő Szűcs?*

**JMB:** I believe it was rather soon after my first visit to Hungary, which was in 1972, where I attended a conference on the 750th anniversary of the 1222 Golden Bull at Székesfehérvár, and where I was “the Canadian delegation”—the American one was my friend James Ross Sweeney. But it was only a short meeting, since I got a visa only for a one-week stay, not longer than that.

As a matter of fact, I tried to extend it. It was a strange little story. I had to go to the police office dealing with foreigners and ask for a visa extension for family reasons. When I came to the window, I heard:

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<sup>170</sup> János M. Bak and Gerhard Benecke, eds., *Religion and Rural Revolt: Papers Presented to the Fourth Interdisciplinary Workshop on Peasant Studies, University of British Columbia, 1982* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>171</sup> Aron Yakovlevich Gurevich (1924–2006), historian.

<sup>172</sup> Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János M. Bak and Paul Hollingsworth, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

“Wait a minute,” and a gentleman came out whom I knew from the Youth Movement. He said: “Hello, servus, how are you? What have you been doing all this time?” I said: “Don’t ask. You’ve got that in your dossiers. So don’t ask me questions.” And then I said that I would like to have a week’s extension. He said: “Well, we can do that favor for you, but you could do some favors for us.” I said: “I can do anything medieval for you, whatever you wish.” He said: “Well, you surely have some contacts there with people in the emigration.” “Yes,” I said. “Would you be willing to cooperate on this matter with us?” “No,” I said, “no, thanks.” He had no problem with that, we shook hands, and I left. That was almost all they did, no pushing. Then, in the later seventies I could regularly come to Hungary; they somehow had changed their mind and never bothered me again.

**GK:** *I remember I met you at my office at the Historical Institute, sometime in 1978 or 1979, something like that.*

**JMB:** Yes, something like that. But already in 1974 or 1975 I was here for the summer. My parents got old and therefore couldn’t come to visit, while we earlier had always met in Yugoslavia; so that was also a reason. And at that point I became really close friends with Szűcs and with a good number of the younger people like yourself and your colleagues—and naturally, also with the modern historians through my friend Litván, who was also working at the Institute of Historical Studies.

But I was then travelling quite extensively to the rest of Central Europe, to Czechoslovakia and Poland; it was in a way easier with my German or by that time Canadian passport than for my Hungarian friends, if they wanted to travel from one socialist country to the other. It was then that I first got acquainted with Dušan Třeštík<sup>173</sup> and quite a number of other colleagues from Prague whom I knew already from my German times. They were visiting Marburg. Miroslav Hroch<sup>174</sup> was there once on an exchange. So I got acquainted with what was going on there. Then I made friends in Poland; I revived my old interest

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<sup>173</sup> Dušan Třeštík (1933–2007), historian.

<sup>174</sup> Miroslav Hroch (b.1932), historian.

in Hungarian parliamentarianism and the estates; I became friends with Stanisław Russocki.<sup>175</sup> I was invited to lecture in Cracow—much earlier than I was allowed to speak in Budapest.

The peasant studies did not keep me much further because the *Decreta* project, into which I got involved by coincidence, took most of my time and interest.

**GK:** *But there was still the conference on Rusticus in Vancouver as one of the annual medieval workshops. It was for this conference that I came to Vancouver for the first time, in 1986.*

**JMB:** Yes. We had a workshop on related matters more than once; Dell Sweeney<sup>176</sup> published some of these papers. And Religion and Rural Revolt also grew out of one of the workshops. I stayed with the Journal of Peasant Studies for a while and kept my friendship with Rodney Hilton. He came over to Vancouver once as well and gave papers there and in Seattle. But the Journal people then moved into directions quite different from mine. They showed—understandably—greater interest in present-day peasant societies than in historical ones, focusing on India and Latin America, and then, methodologically moving into the direction of Althusserian Marxism, which I could not follow anymore; that was simply too obscure for me.

Then again by coincidence—this time a tragic one—my old interest in kingship came again to the fore. A friend of mine whom I had met earlier in Toronto, John Brückmann,<sup>177</sup> who wrote a very important thesis on the dating of the Anglo-Saxon *ordines*, died in 1983. His wife and friends at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (PIMS) where he worked, among them Leonard Boyle,<sup>178</sup> a good friend of John, suggested that we hold a memorial conference for him.

**GK:** *What a start for the Majestas project. But before discussing that, Toronto would merit a few words, since it was an important center of medieval studies.*

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<sup>175</sup> Stanisław Russocki (1930–2002), historian.

<sup>176</sup> Dell Sweeney, historian, university administrator.

<sup>177</sup> John Brückmann (d.1983), historian.

<sup>178</sup> Leonard Eugene Boyle, OP, OC (1923–99), historian, palaeographer.

**JMB:** It was indeed an important center for medieval studies, both the Pontifical Institute and the Medieval Center at the university. A social historian at PIMS who got very close to my heart and from whom I learned a lot was Michael Sheehan,<sup>179</sup> who worked on family and marriage and taught me quite a lot about things we now call historical anthropology. Then my interest in dissenting and orthodox Christianity fitted very well into our friendship; Michael, as a Basilian monk, was as critical of his Church as one could be—when you are inside, then you know what it is all about. He was a good Irish Catholic. Sheehan died relatively young, very much mourned by us. Boyle, as you know, went to the Vatican. I visited him in Rome and enjoyed his hospitality very much; I liked his simple quarters very much, where he lived with some other Irish monks in San Clemente.

**GK:** *Yes, I agree. I have been there myself.*

**JMB:** I especially liked to sit in the kind of clubroom of San Clemente, where the TV was tuned exclusively to football and on the table the reading material contained not a single piece of devotional literature but mostly good English and Scottish detective novels—genuine real-life Catholicism, not like the overly pious, bigoted way it had become in the post-Tridentine times, but rather in a good medieval manner: Catholicism as full life.

**GK:** *But let us return to the creation of Majestas.*

**JMB:** In a meeting at PIMS we planned the conference for Brückmann. In those times, there was easy money for such things in Canada. If you applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for such a conference, you got what you needed more or less. Of course, we had a good reputation there by that time; I had held at least eight or nine medieval workshops, which they had always financed. In the subsequent years it happened that we forgot to submit the annual

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<sup>179</sup> Michael M. Sheehan CSB (d.1992), historian.



application, and we were called from Ottawa: “What is going on? Are you really not asking for money, or did you just forget?”

The conference in 1985 was held in cooperation with the Centre of Medieval Studies of the University of Toronto and Glendon College in Toronto, where Brückmann used to teach. We invited the people who worked on kings and coronations: Janet Nelson, Jacques Le Goff,<sup>180</sup> Bob Benson,<sup>181</sup> Reinhardt Elze,<sup>182</sup> Hartmut Hoffmann,<sup>183</sup> and a number of younger colleagues.

When I phoned Benson, he said that he could not get travel money from UCLA unless it was a meeting of a learned society. “Oh,” I said, “Robert, you will attend the first meeting of the learned society ‘*Majestas*: Society for the Study on Medieval Kingship.’” We founded it during that telephone conversation.

In Toronto everyone joined; young people volunteered for secretarial and editorial assistance. That is how *Majestas* came into being. We were planning to publish a journal, which we managed to start relatively soon, in a couple of years, with the cooperation of early modernists as well, for example Heinz Duchhard<sup>184</sup> in Germany. *Majestas* had two or three very good congresses—later on in Paris and in Oslo.

**GK:** *That first congress, the Toronto one, was that the one which resulted in the volume on Coronations?*

**JMB:** That is what the *Coronation* volume<sup>185</sup> is based on. I very much enjoyed writing a preface to that book.<sup>186</sup> I not only could make a survey of where things stood after the deaths of the three leading scholars of the field—Kantorowicz, Schramm, and Ullmann—but could also for the first time underline something which is still my hobby, an axe

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<sup>180</sup> See p. 10, n. 5.

<sup>181</sup> Robert L. Benson (1926–96), historian.

<sup>182</sup> Reinhardt Elze (1922–2000), historian.

<sup>183</sup> Hartmut Hoffmann (1930–2016), historian.

<sup>184</sup> Heinz Duchhard (b. 1943), historian.

<sup>185</sup> János M. Bak, ed., *Coronations: Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>186</sup> János M. Bak, “Coronation Studies—Past, Present, Future,” in *Coronations*, 1–15; see also in Hungarian, “Koronázástudomány—múlt, jelen, jövő,” *Aetas* (1991): 152–66.

I am grinding, a point I had learned from Schramm: namely, that prescriptive sources such as coronation ordines and the like should be more closely confronted with eyewitness sources to see whether all of that really happened.

And the other issue with which I did not get much further, because the source material does not allow it, was the question I raised there already, the question of how much of all that ceremony was received, was “decoded,” and understood by those at whom it was aimed. I mean, it certainly was aimed at the rulers themselves; it was instructing them, very often young males, about what this office was all about. We have a nice example for a later time, Maximilian I, for whom a kind of a little comic book was made, describing what he would have to say and have to learn there. But it was to be aimed, essentially, at the subjects. If all that was for the purpose of a legitimization of a rule, then it was to be a message for the subjects.

**GK:** *Sure.*

**JMB:** But did they “read” it? Alas, we cannot give much of an answer to that.

**GK:** *But at least one can ask the question.*

**JMB:** Yes, that is right. The only successful scholar in this matter was Marc Bloch,<sup>187</sup> who had the advantage of having records of a number of people who came to be healed by the king’s touch. Thus, we know that a few hundred or even thousand Frenchmen “knew” that the king could do that: They got the message. In England we have some similar evidence for this miracle. That was a special French–English matter, with the angelic oil, but elsewhere we have nothing similar to it.

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<sup>187</sup> Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges: étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*, Publications de la Faculté des lettres de l’Université de Strasbourg 19 (Paris: Librairie Istra, 1924); translated as Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England*, trans. J. E. Anderson (New York: Dorset Press, 1989).

I was pleased to note that historians read my musings on this issue, and recently a young colleague referred to my methodological suggestions in a book on late medieval German coronations. That is why it made sense to include it in the collection of my articles that you and Balázs put together a few years ago.<sup>188</sup>

The *Majestas* project and all the workshops and conferences I had organized suggested that my old Boy Scout and Komsomol “training” gave me strength for academic organization work. *Majestas* went well for a dozen of years.

**GK:** *Yes, I could testify to that because I was in Paris at the Majestas conference on “bad kings.” And there was another one in Oslo in 2000—at the World Congress of Historical Sciences.*

**JMB:** And also one in Ireland. Oslo was the last conference and not a very interesting one. By then we did not have enough paying members, not enough interest. The journal *Majestas* also had twelve volumes (until 2004); a few very good pieces were published there. By that time, we had run out of steam.

**GK:** *That is not what could have been expected for such a fascinating theme.*

**JMB:** The last two volumes were pretty much financed from our own pocket. We had to change publishers, but neither of them saw enough business in it when we could not guarantee sufficient copies paid by members—although there were a good number of library subscribers.

It is puzzling, for it was not that interest in this field of studies would have declined; only our format of association with our printed journal seemed to have gone out fashion. Or the leadership was not active enough. I was too far away, became more interested in other things; Richard Jackson,<sup>189</sup> my successor as chairman, was working on his big books, and so on. In the meantime, there was the big change of

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<sup>188</sup> János M. Bak, *Studying Medieval Rulers and Their Subjects: Central Europe and Beyond*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay and Balázs Nagy, Variorum collected studies series 956 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>189</sup> Richard A. Jackson (b.1937), historian.

scholarly life from small live conferences and journals to computer communication. We did consider changing to digital format, but then had no people for that.

**GK:** *It was indeed a strange story. The association was founded in a historical moment, when, approaching the final decline of all royal dynasties, monarchy suddenly became a subject of interest. This lasted for a decade, but then slowly vanished and evaporated. It seems we missed the right moment to win one of the still reigning dynasties to support Majestas.*

**JMB:** Right, it was indeed the time when there were the big international exhibitions on dynasties: the Carolingians, the Babenbergs, the Salians—and the anniversary of the baptism of Clovis in France.

**GK:** *Those were all local initiatives.*

**JMB:** But also national initiatives, mainly in the well-settled democracies. They perhaps thought that they could risk being a bit monarchical.

**GK:** *But that did not mean that the monarchical principle by itself would have received some kind of funding.*

**JMB:** No, not that. Well, we had, of course, some good contacts in France with genuine monarchists. There was also a scholar among them, Michel Pastoureau,<sup>190</sup> a heraldist; he and his friends supported *Majestas*. And there were a few conferences with which we were cooperating that had a touch of monarchism and a bit of anti-republicanism. The big festivities at the anniversary of the baptism of Clovis were both national and Catholic in a way against the socialist governments under Mitterrand.

**GK:** *How about other European countries?*

**JMB:** *Majestas* business brought me back to Germany many times. But this was the time when I more regularly came to Hungary as well.

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<sup>190</sup> Michel Pastoureau (b.1947), historian, heraldist.

I was in Budapest several times on Canadian-Hungarian Cultural Exchange. And I enjoyed very much being the Canadian guest of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and then met a really good number of the old colleagues and new ones.

Once I was even invited to give a lecture in a seminar in Debrecen on religion and rural revolt. There, the dean checked with the party secretary, and they said: "Well, no problem, he used to be a counter-revolutionary, but he is okay." Friends at ELTE in Budapest also wanted to invite me, but the appropriate authorities blocked that. But, of course, at that university they did not let Jenő Szűcs speak either, so I was not surprised.

**GK:** *ELTE was one of the universities that were under the strictest control still in the 1980s. Although, the control was not that strict because Éva H. Balázs was there, and actually by the end of the eighties I was there too. It was pretty tolerant of them to employ me, somebody who was known to be active in the democratic opposition and signing protest petitions, so the control was not that harsh. And by the end of the 1980s, Péter Hanák would also be invited for a lecture.*

**JMB:** Finally, yes.

**GK:** *One could see that the system was breaking up.*

**JMB:** It was a rather slow break. One could not have foreseen that in a couple of years it would... then the world changed.

**GK:** *Before coming to this change, the big change of 1989, let us just remain in Canada for a moment. So was there any other scholarly interest or scholarly network or something that you might want to speak about in America? In the late eighties you may have been thinking about coming back to Europe, right?*

**JMB:** I was not really planning to get away from there after the early attempts at Germany we spoke about. I was very happy there, with the possibilities to come to Europe and to Hungary whenever I had time.

And, indeed, I had my friends and scholarly network on the West Coast and beyond.

**GK:** *There was the Medieval Association of the Pacific (MAP).*

**JMB:** Yes, and while I had my old and new European contacts, MAP brought us together with UCLA, with Berkeley, Stanford, and so on. We often held our annual workshop in cooperation with MAP. Carolyn Bynum<sup>191</sup> had just come to Seattle in those years, and we kept a good friendship for a while. In one of my last years, the Medieval Academy of America—where I had been mostly active in the teaching-oriented committee of CARA—came to Vancouver for the twentieth workshop of UBC.

**GK:** *Yes, there was a huge meeting in 1990. I remember that.*

**JMB:** Dick Unger and I were the hosts, and we were very successful, particularly because, through friends in Chinatown, we were able to offer the participants an enormously sumptuous Chinese dinner for half of the price they usually pay in America. You may say, we “cashed in” on that: Dick was elected president—okay, some twenty years later—and I used the scholarly services of American friends when at CEU, and my requests—for reading a thesis, commenting on projects, and so on—were never rejected.

**GK:** *May we also talk about your family there?*

**JMB:** I married an American girl, Polly, then a student of Chinese history, active in the civil rights movements before I went to Canada, and we lived there for twenty-five years happily together. My daughter Gamma, who grew up in Berlin, came over when she was twelve and went to school in Vancouver, then studied filmmaking at Simon Fraser University. Later, she went back to Berlin, where her mother and she still live.

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<sup>191</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum (b.1941), historian.

**GK:** *That was a long chapter in your life.*

**JMB:** And I liked it very much there, particularly as I had much freedom. When I became senior faculty, I did not have very many obligations in terms of courses; I could work on my edition project of medieval Hungarian laws and other things, busy with the workshops—and by mid-April I could come over to Europe, either for holiday or for working in the library or meeting people. I did not really have plans other than to participate more regularly in things here, maybe to do in Hungary what I had done earlier in Germany: to give occasional courses. Then I was invited, already before the change of the regime, to an American university that held courses in Budapest—which you and István Rév<sup>192</sup> were organizing.

**GK:** *Yes, it was an education abroad program of the universities of California and Wisconsin, organized in cooperation with Iván Szelényi,<sup>193</sup> at that time in Wisconsin. It was his idea and also of somebody at Berkeley, which had been bringing American students to Hungary since the mid-1980s. I remember that you were involved a little bit in that.*

**JMB:** I gave a course on something once or twice. So there was this kind of possibility of moving around. And then came the historical moment of the festive re-burial of Imre Nagy and fellow martyrs on June 16, 1989.

**GK:** *Were you actually there?*

**JMB:** I was there, of course. I was in Budapest anyhow as usual almost all summer, but naturally I was there for that event. I knew quite a bit about what was going on. The leaders of the Committee for Historical Justice (Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottsága—TIB), who worked for the rehabilitation of Nagy and the other victims of the Kádárist repression, were very close friends of mine: András B. Hegedűs, a childhood friend, and my old friend Litván.

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<sup>192</sup> István Rév (b.1951), historian.

<sup>193</sup> Iván Szelényi (b.1938), sociologist.

In those years, I often stayed with Hegedűs in his, by now famous, flat on Gerlőczy Street, as my parents were dead and thus the house in Buda, where we had moved in 1946, was not available anymore. If there was a political meeting, we always made sure that I should not be at home. No need to make the secret police say that an American agent was present at the meetings. But I knew very well about the preparations and actually was at home when, a few days before the event, Hegedűs negotiated with the chief of police of Budapest how the funeral would be secured and held in peace.

**GK:** *Was that already a semiofficial negotiation?*

**JMB:** Absolutely official.

**GK:** *Was the Committee for Historical Justice officially accepted as an organizer?*

**JMB:** Yes, it was. They also spoke to the Party Central Committee, and an agreement was made that the government and the Communist Party leaders could place a wreath at the catafalque but would not speak or do anything more.

Just recently, there was a commemoration, and János Rainer,<sup>194</sup> the director of the Institute for History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, said that there were two readings of June 16, 1989. There was the opposition's reading of having started and symbolically marked the change of regime, and the reading of the communist side, that it was a day of...

**GK:** *...national truce.*

**JMB:** Something like that. And there were many negotiations which some of the radicals, for example the younger Krassó,<sup>195</sup> very much opposed. Compromises were made in order to avoid confrontation so that neither bloodshed nor even any kind of provocation should happen.

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<sup>194</sup> János Rainer M. (b.1957), historian.

<sup>195</sup> György Krassó (1932–91), economist, political activist.



**GK:** *And then Viktor Orbán<sup>196</sup> broke the agreement.*

**JMB:** Indeed. He did not share his plan with his elders. I was having lunch with György Litván and Péter Kende, who was back from Paris, at a restaurant on Halász Street when Viktor came by; we sat on the terrace, and they spoke about the coming day. He certainly did not say: “And I will not stick to your kind of compromise and will openly say that the Russians should leave the country.” But, as we know, he did so, and it did not cause any major upheaval.

**GK:** *Did this event bring a change in your life?*

**JMB:** Well, in my personal history a meeting on that very evening became important. This was in the house of János Kenedi,<sup>197</sup> a leading member of the democratic opposition, at which the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—in a way a successor of the Imre Nagy Institute in Brussels—was founded in the presence of Professor and General Béla Király and several people who were working here in Hungary on these subjects, like János Rainer, who as an archivist had put together the first more or less complete list of those who were executed during the repression of the revolution.

At that meeting I was asked how much I could cooperate with the new institute. Well, I considered the situation and realized that I had another sabbatical or two left from Vancouver, at the end of which I was more or less up to retirement. I took the sabbatical leaves and then retired, was granted the “emeritus” title, and gradually moved to Budapest. A few months later I was offered the formal position of Senior Scholarly Consultant of the institute, which was accepted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as a research center and given a room somewhere near the other institutes.

**GK:** *The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.*

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<sup>196</sup> Viktor Orbán (b.1963), lawyer, politician. Prime minister of Hungary 1998–2002 and since 2010.

<sup>197</sup> János Kenedi (b.1947), writer, historian.

**JMB:** It was called “of the history and documentation of the Revolution of 1956.” Relatively early in the discussion it was decided that it should not be called “Imre Nagy Institute,” as the one in Belgium had been. First, I did not agree with that but then, when we had learned a little bit more about the many colors this uprising included, I realized that both historically and politically it made sense not to bind the institute to one person’s memory.

The first task of the institute was to bring out some kind of textbook or reader—something to enable history teachers to speak about 1956. Litván, Gyula Kozák,<sup>198</sup> Rainer, and myself wrote one in a few months’ time that was still in many points quite naïve.<sup>199</sup> It reflected the ideas we had in the surroundings of Imre Nagy, seeing in the revolution a kind of socialist movement, one for a better socialism and so on. The book was translated into German<sup>200</sup> and soon thereafter also into English.<sup>201</sup> Every time—there was always a year or more between these versions—we learned more about what had happened in the country, and it became a little bit more realistic, realizing that there had been many, many ideas coming together in the disagreement with the communist regime. It was the standard work on 1956 for quite some time. Not very long ago, Longman, who published the English version, planned to reprint it and asked our permission. We did not grant it, saying that the story had been revised in many details in the meantime. It had a small afterlife: My chapter about the programs and “what was it all about,” as its title ran, came out, again a bit rewritten, in Russian a few years ago as a preface to János Rainer’s biography of Imre Nagy.<sup>202</sup> And in 2006, I read this Rus-

198 Gyula Kozák (b.1941), sociologist, writer.

199 János M. Bak, Gyula Kozák, György Litván, and János M. Rainer, eds., *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom: Reform–felkelés–szabadságharc–megtorlás* [The Hungarian revolution of 1956: Reform, revolt, war of independence, repression] (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1991).

200 János M. Bak, and György Litván, eds., *Die ungarische Revolution 1956: Reform, Aufstand, Vergeltung*, trans. Anne Nass (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1994).

201 János M. Bak, and György Litván, eds., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953–1963*, trans. János M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters (London: Longman, 1996).

202 János M. Bak, “V chem, sostvenno, bylo delo? Tseli i programmy vengerskoi revolutsii 1956 goda” [What was it all about? Aims and programs of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956], preface to *Imre Nad’ prem’er–ministr vengerskoi revolutsii 1956 goda: Politicheskaiia biografiia* [Imre Nagy, prime minister of the Hungarian revolution 1956: A political biography], ed. by János M. Rainer, transl. Olga Khabanova (Moscow: Logos, 2006), 5–19.

sian text as a lecture in Izhevsk—Mr. Kalashnikov’s hometown—where they have a chair of Hungarian and Finno-Ugric studies, since it is the capital of the Udmurt Republic.

So I was then a senior research consultant, employed for normal academic salary, and then we moved into our own premises; the institute became a public foundation, and I became the editor of several books and the first two yearbooks. I suggested that the institute should have an annual—that seems to be a mania of mine that I impose on all institutions I am involved with. So CEU Medieval Studies also has an annual. Book production was my hobby, so I thought I knew what a book should look like. That caused plenty of frustration; cooperating with printers and publishers in Hungary was not exactly what I was used to in Canada, and it irritated me to no end.

I am not quite sure whether I would have stayed in Budapest had I not had another alternative that showed up in the person of Gábor Klaniczay, who said that he was building up a medieval studies department at the Central European University and asked whether I would like to play that game.

**GK:** *This happened in 1992, when we got together in Los Angeles at the house of Henrik Birnbaum,<sup>203</sup> at Pacific Palisades, which is not precisely Central Europe.*

**JMB:** Well, in 1991, George Soros<sup>204</sup> founded the Central European University in Budapest and Prague. Actually, I had heard about its planning on the terrace of Litván’s weekend house on Lupa Island of the Danube—where the Soros family, longtime friends of his, also had one—already a year or so earlier. It was to be a training school for future postcommunist leadership, concentrating on matters modern and contemporary: economics, political science, and so on.

But Soros seemed to have heard about you and your friends, scholars and oppositionals, and wished to include you in the new project—and then, you managed to “sell” the idea of a medieval program to

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<sup>203</sup> Henrik Birnbaum (1925–2002), Slavist.

<sup>204</sup> George Soros, (b.1930), Hungarian-American investor, business magnate, philanthropist.

him.<sup>205</sup> And we were lucky; as medieval subjects were popular in America, some books even made it to the bestseller lists for quite some weeks. Thus, our plans could be implemented. You, in turn, had the splendid idea of involving me.

**GK:** *With great pleasure! And this pleasure of working together has been lasting now for twenty-five years. So in 1992 we embarked upon an entirely new experience. We decided that we would create an American-style, or new-style, or unheard-of style medieval studies department at the Central European University. There was already a history department headed by Péter Hanák, your old friend, and where I had also contacts to many other colleagues. We could have joined his department, but what we wanted was rather to bring to life here in Budapest something that we dreamed up seeing what was happening in the world in medieval studies. And that was not only part of historical studies, but rather an interdisciplinary, horizontal alliance of different disciplines dealing with the Middle Ages.*

**JMB:** Right. Now, let me start with saying that for a person devoted to teaching, like myself, it is absolutely a godsend to have a possibility to build up a school according to my and my friends' ideas and not to pre-conceived and already set up frames. That was, as I have already mentioned, briefly given to me at the gymnasium in 1954, but this time it was a project of major purview. It was quite clear that we would have to do many new things, and I think my highly honored late friend Ihor Ševčenko<sup>206</sup> best formulated our mission, when he said: "You have to do here two things at the same time. Be on the one hand a helping hand, a 'Hilfsschule' for those in Eastern Europe who don't know much about modern medieval studies and medieval studies in the European-Western style, and at the same time be a place for high-quality research and study." That was quite a challenge. We faced that challenge. I felt that we started out well. We have used a good number of

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<sup>205</sup> See, Gábor Klaniczay, "Medieval Origins of Central Europe: An Invention or a Discovery?" in *The Paradoxes of Unintended Consequences*, ed. Lord Dahrendorf et al. (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2000), 251–64.

<sup>206</sup> Ihor Ševčenko (1922–2009), historian, philologist.

experiences of my friends in Hungary and added the experiences of others of us from Germany and myself from North America.

**GK:** *Once our proposal of creating a new department of medieval studies was formally accepted, we arranged an official planning meeting in the autumn of 1992, in the hunting lodge of Erdőtarcsa (a nice Baroque cottage used by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for scholarly meetings), where we were looking precisely for such an exchange of ideas with our colleagues. That was quite a group: Hans Belting,<sup>207</sup> František Šmahel,<sup>208</sup> Ferdinand Seibt,<sup>209</sup> Aleksander Gieysztor,<sup>210</sup> Ernő Marosi,<sup>211</sup> and Pál Engel<sup>212</sup> agreed to sit down with our freshly recruited faculty for a two-day brainstorming session. What is your recollection of this first big discussion of what we were going to do at CEU?*

**JMB:** As far as I remember, all being present enjoyed that they could propose format and course structure freely, without any constraint—describe their ideal university, so to say. Everyone had experience with existing programs and their shortcomings, and now they could “dream up” one that would be the best of all worlds. We knew about some graduate programs that could serve as a model—I remember having studied the one-year MA in medieval studies program at Leeds—but were aware that this one had to accommodate the conditions of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. I believe we chose the right combination of tradition and innovation.

**GK:** *All this was, of course, refining our vision on medievalist scholarship, and we were very keen to dedicate attention to this. But we had to take into consideration what the immense variety of our students—coming from more than a dozen countries—would bring from home. We had to build on the foundations they could have acquired at home.*

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207 Hans Belting (b.1935), art historian.

208 On František Šmahel (b.1934), see the introduction on page 197.

209 Ferdinand Seibt (1927–2003), German historian and medievalist.

210 Aleksander Gieysztor (1916–99), Polish historian.

211 Ernő Marosi (b.1940), Hungarian art historian.

212 Pál Engel (1938–2001), historian.

**JMB:** When we started out with that school, it was, of course, very refreshing to see that our students, at that point all of them East Europeans—there were no Westerners yet—had in most of the conservative Eastern European universities, however communist *gleichgeschaltet* they may have been, received a reasonably good training in the basic tools of research, in the so-called auxiliary sciences. A good number of them had had Latin, of course, some of them also good Greek and Old Church Slavonic, while in the beginning their English needed help. Within the decade the priorities changed; they came with reasonably good English but their Latin or other classical or medieval languages were weaker than in the old-fashioned universities—as they became less old-fashioned all around the region. And then, students appeared from elsewhere, including the Anglo-American world, with much less training behind them.

**GK:** *There was a big surprise when we started out, a pleasant surprise. There were people coming to us, to our MA program, already having finished their doctoral or candidate dissertations. They were longing for something that we could offer: a kind of conversion of their thorough training in the local tradition to the international market.*

**JMB:** That is right, yes.

**GK:** *For example, we would not have dreamed to have students from Bulgaria, knowing Greek, Latin, and Old Church Slavonic from the Humanist Gymnasium in Sofia.*

**JMB:** And good English. That was due to the patronage of the daughter of Todor Zhivkov.<sup>213</sup> The Zhivkova Institute<sup>214</sup> with English courses in Bulgaria—to which, I have heard, even people from Berlin went because it was cheap—was very good.

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<sup>213</sup> Todor Hristov Zhivkov (1911–98), Bulgarian politician; communist leader of the People's Republic of Bulgaria from 1954 until 1989

<sup>214</sup> Organized by Lyudmila Todorova Zhivkova (1942–81), the daughter of Todor Zhivkov, senior Bulgarian Communist Party functionary and Politburo member. President of the Committee for Art and Culture from 1975 until 1981.

We started out with that kind of mature students with a head start, so these were very enjoyable pioneering years. For me it was a great experience, as I had relatively limited chances to have good graduate students in Canada, as I have mentioned before. I could work out what I think was my favorite enterprise in our new department: an intensive course of introduction to research in cooperation with several colleagues, including not only bibliography, paleography, and diplomatics, but also archaeology, art history, theology, and philosophy.

**GK:** *That was precisely one of the key ideas of the program: not only history, but also archaeology—we had Józsa Laszlovsky<sup>215</sup> as an archaeologist; we had art historians, literary historians; we invited experts of theology, patristic studies; and we made an opening towards historical anthropology.*

**JMB:** I have learned a hell of a lot in these fields about which I knew little, save some art history from my times in Marburg. The introductory course allowed me to get to know all our students, not only the historians or those taking special courses with me. I was very pleased to see that very many of them had fine academic careers after graduation, and I kept in touch with a great number of our alumni and alumnae. Indeed, I have still quite a few friends among them. Moreover, as they learned new methods and approaches, such as historical anthropology, the study of everyday life, and so on, I also became acquainted with them. To say nothing of having learned much about various regions of Central Europe, from the Baltic to Galicia and Dalmatia, about which I knew very little before.

**GK:** *You also held a course on “Signs and Symbols of Power” and “Coronations and Rituals.”*

**JMB:** I did my old stuff in a new dress, and it was rewarding to see that a fair number of students, basically political historians that most medievalists used to be, were able to incorporate those kinds of aspects of iconology, of ritual, and ceremonial that remained a major interest of mine. I tried to follow the counsel of an old article by Jacques

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<sup>215</sup> József Laszlovsky (b.1958), Hungarian archaeologist and medievalist.

Le Goff<sup>216</sup> in the American journal *Daedalus*: “Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?”<sup>217</sup> Jacques’s answer was: “Yes, but not in the old way of kings, battles, and treaties, but by looking at the structures of power, its legitimization, the reflection of politics in narratives and the like.” That is what I tried to do, and I managed to have some of my students turn away from old-fashioned political history to such analytical approaches.

**GK:** *But then you started a new project about nobilities.*

**JMB:** That again was a challenge from the students, who were interested in the elites of their countries. My first doctoral students, Damir Karbić and Ivan Jurković from Coatia, Nada Zečević from Serbia, Yurii Zazuliak from Galicia, and Cosmin Popa-Gorjanu from Transylvania, and quite a few MA candidates chose to write their theses about problems of nobility and aristocracy.

**GK:** *So there was a team around you working on nobilities.*

**JMB:** Then we tried to widen this into a comparative research project. With the starting team, we drafted a kind of questionnaire, and the idea was to get the answers from historians in the various countries of Eastern and Central Europe and then make a systematic comparison. However, we found out that most of those who participated spoke on whatever they knew about anyhow, regardless of our questionnaire.

**GK:** *It was a very good questionnaire, though.*

**JMB:** Yes, but people did not stick to it. Still a few good essays came about, which we published in the journal *East Central Europe*. We still have plans to try something like it again, in the longer run. We had a good talk about it under the leadership of Cosmin in Alba Iulia a few years ago, but it is not coming along very well. Our plan now is that, for a start, we would bring out a glossary of the expressions and notions

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<sup>216</sup> See p. 10, n. 5.

<sup>217</sup> Jacques Le Goff, “Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (1971): 1–19.



about nobility in this region, maybe together with the Northern Europeans—it became a new idea of some of my friends to establish Central Europe and Scandinavia, as the margins of Europe, as a possible frame of comparison.

**GK:** *Now, you mentioned Central Europe, or East Central Europe. Our university's name is "Central European University." But you are not fully at ease with this notion.*

**JMB:** I have my reservations about the notions of "Eastern Europe," "East Central Europe," and "Central Europe." I believe, this is—to put it into medieval terms—a nominalist versus a realist matter. The issue is whether one regards the "region" as some given, existing reality or a heuristic device to test whether it existed, and if so, in what sense and to what extent. I do not object to having these terms as tools to study where connections are and where they are not, what comparable features are there and what are not, or how many apples and pears are there. It is still workable, but if it is also grapes and carrots, then maybe one should be more careful talking about vegetables and fruits altogether. Therefore, if we are open-minded about this kind of rim of Europe, the Europe outside the major empires, and then try to look at what are valid comparisons, that makes sense.

Nevertheless, one should not take "the region" for granted, not for the earlier history of the countries—in comparison to the modern centuries—and keep in mind that all these terms are politically motivated inventions of the last one hundred years—I tried to discuss this recently also concerning a parallel term, "Southeastern Europe," which is another political construct. Was there, in the period we are studying, the Middle Ages, any perception of the "region" as such? Were the contacts and connections between the kingdoms and duchies in this strip "from the Baltic to the Adriatic" stronger than to areas outside—west, south and so on—of it?

Closer to my field of study: The similarity of the social structure of the elites, which Ferenc Maksay<sup>218</sup> called "*les pays de la noblesse nombreuse*,"

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<sup>218</sup> Ferenc Maksay (1916–84), Hungarian historian.

in the countries of Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and maybe also Moldavia, is obvious, but, for example, Bohemia was already very different. Does the Prussia of the Teutonic Order not belong to East Central Europe just because it is a closer part of the empire than Bohemia, also part of the empire, and indeed had in social and other terms a different trajectory than Poland and Hungary or more precisely Lesser Poland? I believe Wielkopolska in the North is again a different story. I learned much about that from Klaus Zernack,<sup>219</sup> who looked at Polish history in the Baltic context as a Polish–Swedish world very different from, say, the Hungarian–Croatian–Bosnian and maybe also Dalmatian world.

**GK:** *Nobody claims that these are the same; they present indeed a great variety. But if you say “a region,” or if you delimit a certain territory, that is just an intention to see some common features or differences. As for ourselves, we propose to focus on what is here, in this region and not in Ireland or in the Far East, because here we have a context where we have the privilege to be able to confront and understand a detailed documentation, in order to measure the relationships more precisely.*

**JMB:** Interactions within the region can be explored. I tried that a few years ago for a meeting in Warsaw. I looked at the diplomatic correspondence and the charters of the kings of Hungary and found that their “interactions” by no means covered the “region.” Their horizon, if I may call it that, was limited to the southern part of Central Europe, the northern Balkans, Venice, and to a lesser extent Austria. Bohemia was marginal, Greater Poland entirely outside of their purview, and so on.

As to comparative history, I think that it is more profitable to compare areas with similar or different natural conditions, rather than merely areas that are close to each other on the map. As you may remember, I argued for that at a meeting of the German Historical Congress in 2000 on a panel headed by Michael Borgolte,<sup>220</sup> the great champion of comparative history. I believe it brings in more to com-

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<sup>219</sup> Klaus Zernack (b.1931), German historian.

<sup>220</sup> Michael Borgolte (b.1948), German historian and medievalist.

pare and contrast flat lands and mountainous regions, coastal ones and inland ones, well-watered and less well-watered, drier, colder and warmer regions – à la Montesquieu<sup>221</sup> if you so wish. Then you explore how the inhabitants handle these “objective conditions.”

In that sense, I am kind of open to possibilities but at the same time remain skeptical about “medieval Central Europe” as an *a priori* given entity. Of course, in modern times the whole story is entirely different. It is a story of several empires and people without history or without state. Poles and Czechs and Magyars experienced this in different ways, and the Ottoman Empire is another story altogether. One should be careful not to project the modern conditions onto the Middle Ages.

**GK:** *However, our expertise makes us cling to the region belonging still to Latin Christianity between the Baltic and the Adriatic. Yet—and this is what I wanted to ask you, because you were one of the initiators of this direction—we should be also open to the area east of it and include the Slavic-Orthodox and Byzantine world, for without that Central Europe makes no sense for medieval studies.*

**JMB:** I agree that this is again a different matter. Comparative history and historical research are one story, teaching history is another. Certainly, linguistic abilities, the national and local background, and so on should qualify us as East Central European historians, but we have to be able to teach it in the context of the Western and Eastern empires and their interaction with those. We should present “the region” in the context of these interactions.

We should not forget that the various concepts of *Mitteleuropa* were political constructs with different motifs behind it. As we know, the excellent “sketch” of Jenő Szűcs’s “three Europes” grew out of protest against the Sovietization-Russification of the “peoples’ democracies.” His argument may in some points be weak, but the idea is quite clear and defensible. It is also an acceptable definition for our teaching and—above all, given the limitations of historical studies outside the region—a necessary one to draw the attention to the history of the

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<sup>221</sup> Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755), French political philosopher.

countries under study. Only we should not, *ceterum censeo*, tie our hands in advance, absolutely insisting on regional cohesion.

**GK:** *The point is taken. Now, let us see how we fared with this opening to Eastern Christianity, to Russia, to Byzantium, to South Slavic domains. For a while we regularly invited Vladimír Vavřínek<sup>222</sup> from Prague, Ihor Ševčenko, and Henrik Birnbaum, and we seriously invested in opening up our interest and our teaching, so that the history of our region gets contemplated as something like a bridge between East and West.*

**JMB:** I am afraid that we did not quite succeed in that for several reasons. But first the positive side: We have been fortunate that our friend István Perczel<sup>223</sup> opened up for us the world of Eastern Christianity and we managed to have good contacts to the world of the Caucasus. Then, for the negative side, there were matters beyond our control: Our old Slavist-Byzantinist friends retired or died; for financial reasons we lost our resident Slavist, Professor Cleminson<sup>224</sup>—and did not care or manage to hire anyone else.

However, I believe the main reason is that Byzantinists seem nowadays not much interested in interactions with the Latin world, not like the historians of the previous generation, such as Schramm or Deér, who always considered Byzantium as a major element in the history of the rest of Europe. Among the younger ones, I know only about Mikhail Bojtsov,<sup>225</sup> who keeps up this tradition, but I may not be well informed about the field. Our other Byzantinist friends, like the late Evelyn Patlagean<sup>226</sup> or Sergey Ivanov<sup>227</sup>—and, I believe, though do not know well, the present Byzantinist members of the department—were not much interested in matters outside the Greek Empire or, as they now call it, the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, I was pleased to see that you have now also an Ottomanist on board, which is important.

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222 Vladimír Vavřínek (b.1930), Czech Slavist and historian.

223 István Perczel (b.1957), Hungarian Byzantinist, patristic scholar.

224 Ralph Cleminson (b.1956), Slavist.

225 Mikhail Bojtsov (b.1961), historian.

226 Evelyn Patlagean (1932–2008), Byzantinist.

227 Sergey A. Ivanov (b.1956), Byzantinist.

**GK:** *Recently there was a project organized by Nora Berend<sup>228</sup>—in which the department was involved—on Christianization and the rise of Christian monarchies that included not only Scandinavia but also Kievan Rus’.*

**JMB:** That was fine, only that they were again parallel stories next to each other, with little attempt at a comparative or global overview.

**GK:** *There was a common questionnaire,<sup>229</sup> and to my knowledge, very few similar enterprises adhere to a common questionnaire—as you mentioned about the nobility project of yours.*

**JMB:** It was certainly a major step forward. Only, it could not at the same time move the contributors to look beyond the borders of their own countries. I had a funny experience in this regard some time ago, while working on the Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages. As you know, I am a big encyclopedia person.

**GK:** *Oh yes. We should not forget to mention all those encyclopedia and handbook articles you wrote.*

**JMB:** I like to do that; it is a challenging task to write something in a few words but still give the most important information. It was in this context that I encountered a typical example of the national limitation of some historians in the region. A Czech colleague whom I asked to write about the headword “Labe/Elbe” wrote that the river originates from this and that mountain, flows there and there and then leaves Bohemia—end of the Elbe. It was as *éclatant* as nothing else could be.

What I mean is that close neighbors in Central Europe do not care much about each other. It would be the task of a Central European enterprise to get these neighbors somehow together. We have achieved something in this regard, to be sure. While at CEU, our students from

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228 Nora Berend (b.1966), historian, editor of *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchies: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c. 900–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

229 See, “Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy,” Nora Berend, accessed December 23, 2017, <http://christianization.hist.cam.ac.uk/menu.html>.

Central Europe and beyond learn something about other countries than their own and make contacts, even friends, from among their “neighbors.” However, if I am not mistaken, most of them did their research on their own countries. Sure, there were exceptions, such as Antonín Kalous—now in Olomouc, where we have a true colony of our students—who has done pioneering work on Hungarian sources and found things that Hungarian scholars have not.

Perhaps one could do more in this regard. For example, encourage students, at least on the doctoral level, to learn the language of other countries of the region. True, the Slavic speakers get around a bit better than Magyars or Romanians—or Caucasians!—but I know that, for example, a native Russian speaker has to spend quite some time to learn Czech. Of course, for medieval studies, Latin, Greek, or Old Slavonic allows you to do a lot, but for the learned literature and personal contact it would be worth supporting the study of the vernaculars.

**GK:** *I was just trying to think it over; whether there is something general in the field of networking, methodology, or historical experience of writing history that could be discussed or mentioned based on these twenty years of experience you got being involved here. What seems to have been worth investing your time and ours to you now?*

**JMB:** Well, it was worth it to invest in teaching students, first-class students, and to now have a marvelous group of young historians as friends who, as far as I can see, appreciate our contribution to their education. I follow their careers closely, and frequently burden them with my requests and my projects. One of my latest projects, the new edition of my old bibliography of medieval narrative sources, could not have been done without the help of our former students Ivan Jurković, Damir Karbić, Levan Gigineishvili, and Irma Karaulashvili, and a few others. I learned very much from all of them.

As I mentioned, we also completed my big project, about the medieval laws of Hungary, with alumni of ours, and they are now working on its digitalization. Thus, I believe it was a mutually satisfactory, very pleasing experience during all those years. It was also a great experi-

ence that we were able—at least at the beginning, with a rather generous budget—to keep up an international network, mainly for the benefit of the students, but also keeping up some valuable friendships for ourselves. That was not so easy later.

**GK:** *It may have been easier in the beginning, for sure. But then we, so to say, completed and reconstituted our older network, which was a necessity even because of mere demographic reasons: Several of our friends from the beginning are no more with us. True, it could be always better. You still remain very young in that respect; you are never satisfied with what there is.*

**JMB:** True! That is my habit.

**GK:** *It is my experience that whenever something is already done in some form, you immediately...*

**JMB:** ...want to have it better! Yes.

**GK:** *All right. May I ask you a general question about yourself and the Middle Ages? You once spoke and wrote about your “life in the Middle Ages.” Could we recall some ideas from that? What is your general attitude to our field of study?*

**JMB:** It is not too negative. In the course of time, I have learned much about the Middle Ages, but I do not think I particularly “love” it. It was a horrible time. I felt it was my task to tell young people how people worked out their lives in those times and that they were not as dreadful as they had earlier been depicted as “dark ages.” True, on a rather low diet and among unspeakable dangers, thousands and thousands of peasants survived and were there for the labor force of the industrial revolution and built up modern Europe. They even rebelled sometimes and demanded a better life. The aristocracy behaved miserably towards most of its subjects—although often protected them from other men and nature—but was also able to build up European culture, sponsor it, pay the painters, and hire the musicians.

I recently read Karol Modzelewski,<sup>230</sup> who wrote in the preface to his *L'Europa dei barbari*<sup>231</sup> that his own experiences in the world influenced his perception of the past. In the world now, with a civilization falling apart and the whole modernization project menacing to destroy the world, one has maybe a little bit more understanding for that kind of simple way of life, however miserable it may have been—without, of course, idealizing it as the old hippies did. Now we have millions of people living a long life and therefore the health insurance systems collapse and cannot take care of the old because not enough people are working to pay their insurance. And new kinds of “religious” extremism have emerged, worse than any Crusade or Inquisition.

**GK:** *Well, indeed. Apropos attitudes to history, you were also part of a project we did together on the uses of history, that we called at some point “The Uses and Abuses.” It was an attempt to get another kind of understanding of why medieval studies were so popular in the early nineties. As our friend Patrick Geary said, medieval studies are popular, but that is not necessarily good news. Relying upon the ample information we received from our students, we discovered that the history of the Middle Ages became a battleground of nationalisms, identity politics, and also strange archaisms in postcommunist East Central Europe. This is how we organized an entire summer program at the university on this issue in 2002, and I also put together an exhibition from the material gathered by our students, entitled “Contagious Middle Ages” in 2005. But you were also very active in all this.*

**JMB:** Right. I gladly joined that project of yours at the Collegium Budapest. Not without precedents. As long ago as 1981, I read a paper and then published it with my ex-wife, the art historian Anna Bak-Gara,<sup>232</sup> about the nineteenth-century myth of the thousand-year-old constitution of Hungary, with some rather sarcastic remarks about the panorama “Entry of the Hungarians,” painted by Árpád Feszty<sup>233</sup> in

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<sup>230</sup> Karol Modzelewski (b.1937), historian.

<sup>231</sup> Original: Karol Modzelewski, *Barbarzyńska Europa* [Barbarian Europe] (Warsaw: Iskry, 2004).

<sup>232</sup> Anna Bak-Gara (b.1937), art historian.

<sup>233</sup> Árpád Feszty (1856–1914), painter, author.



1894.<sup>234</sup> We had heard that they were about to restore it, but would not have imagined that it was to become that kind of despicable nationalist pilgrimage sight that it is now.

By 1999, I went as far as to talk about the “*Mediävisierung*” of Hungarian politics,<sup>235</sup> so that when German and French colleagues suggested calling a conference on “uses and abuses” of the Middle Ages, I was glad to involve you and others and hold it at CEU. They published the papers, but, alas, without my participation in the editorial work, even though my name appears on the title page. I am not happy with it, but never mind.<sup>236</sup>

So I was both pleased and honored to be a fellow in the last project of the late lamented Collegium Budapest, *Manufacturing the Middle Ages*, on medievalist forgeries and mystifications. I wrote a small piece on a nineteenth-century heroic poem and worked a few years on putting together a volume with the papers presented and a few invited ones.<sup>237</sup> Now that it is done, I am—as usual—dissatisfied with my editorial work. I suspect that book will be the last item in my bibliography. I am still helping my younger colleagues with digitalizing our printed work—the laws and the chronology of narratives—but that is all for my *Rentnerleben*.

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234 János M. Bak and Anna Bak-Gara, “The Ideology of a ‘Millennial Constitution’ of Hungary,” *East European Quarterly* 15 (1981): 307–26; now also in Gábor Klaniczay and Balázs Nagy, eds., *Studying Medieval Rulers and Their Subjects: Central Europe and Beyond*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 956 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

235 János M. Bak, “Die Mediävisierung der Politik im Ungarn des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *Umkämpfte Vergangenheit: Geschichtsbilder, Erinnerung und Vergangenheitspolitik im internationalen Vergleich*, eds. Petra Bock and Edgar Wolfrum (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 103–13.

236 János M. Bak et al., eds., *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters: 19.–21. Jahrhundert. Uses and Abuses of the Middle Ages: 19th–21st Century. Usages et Mésusages du Moyen Age du XIXe au XXIe siècle* (Munich: Fink, 2009).

237 János M. Bak, Patrick Geary, and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., *Manufacturing a Past for the Present: Forgery and Authenticity in Medievalist Texts and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).



## Introducing

# František Šmahel

I first met František Šmahel at the beginning of the 1990s in the seminar of medieval history at the faculty of philosophy at Charles University in Prague. We, ten young men and women sitting in the room, were his first students. Two or even three generations before us had been deprived of a teacher who was not only able to convey the subject matter but also to mediate his deep conviction that the study of history mattered, and especially its professional methodological basis. It mattered so much that it was quite natural to sacrifice many things for it, which otherwise could make life easy and convenient. It mattered in a way which has nothing to do with the romantic dreams about the Middle Ages that we all, the students in the room, cherished in one way or another, or with any of our individual plans for an academic career. We regarded the return of František Šmahel, as well as the return of other proscribed scholars at the university at the beginning of the 1990s, as a victory which would change everything in a short time, and that corresponded to a general feeling. Only much later did it become clear that the removal of František Šmahel and other scholars from university education for twenty or more years after the Soviet occupation in 1968 had lasting consequences that few people were aware of. Their absence created a gap which has not been filled to this day, and which only became more visible with their return and the resumption of their violently interrupted research and teaching careers. Although there are admirable historians who started their careers after the Soviet invasion in 1968, history and the humanities in general suffered, in terms of quality, from their very narrow basis and from a subsequent disintegration of scholarly dialogue. Both deficiencies of the academic

system did not change significantly after the fall of the Wall in 1989. Among the students attending the first seminar that František Šmahel held at the faculty of philosophy, only a few achieved higher academic degrees and became historians; and of these, very few ever gained a permanent academic position. That was not due to their lack of commitment or talent.

A vulgarized set of neoliberal ideologies, along with the complementary concentration of a major part of society on immediate economic profit, prevented postcommunist political representatives from creating an environment in which the humanities had a chance to stabilize themselves—let alone reach the level the humanities had cultivated for two or more generations in the democratic Euro-American societies. To a considerable degree, the humanities in the postcommunist states failed to develop independent responses to Western models, create their own strategies of social self-reflection, and define themselves as guardians of a democratic dialogue in which all parts of society, in one way or another, could take part. The results of this failure are painfully visible today—the past seems to have been forgotten by major segments of society and reinterpreted by self-appointed saviors. These figures formulate political propositions which show a far-from-coincidental resemblance to the propositions of a not-so-distant past, propositions which had led to the greatest disasters ever in the history of human coexistence.

Thanks to František Šmahel, the few of us who had the privilege to attend his seminars became aware of history as a scholarly discipline in a way which was quite singular at that time. František Šmahel not only acquainted us with the most attractive sources from the area of medieval history, he generously invited us to participate in his dense network of distinguished Euro-American scholars, whom we met as guests invited to lecture in our seminar or as teachers during our stays abroad. These were opportunities created for us by Šmahel and his colleagues, who thereby preceded the openness and the ideas of the ERASMUS program, which then was only gradually being introduced in postcommunist countries.

From the beginning, Šmahel's scholarly oeuvre was embedded in an international academic discourse which can be traced back to his

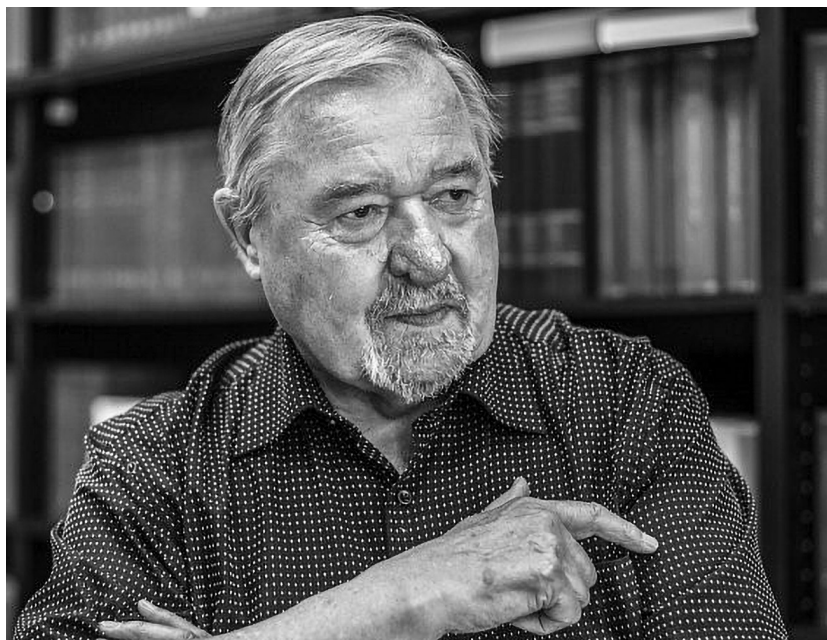
cosmopolitan teachers, Josef Macek and especially František Graus. Graus had been an attentive and visionary critic of the rather conservative majority of German medieval studies scholars in the 1950s and 1960s, whose precise critique was only recognized as crucial a generation later. Macek as well as Graus based their research on Marxist concepts of social order and development; Šmahel followed them in this respect, although not fully. He departed from the two conceptually and theoretically interested historians in his implicit and sometimes explicit mistrust of overwhelming concepts, terms larger than life, and theoretical frameworks borrowed from neighboring disciplines. Šmahel's strength always was his unfailing intuition concerning the significance of individual sources and their potential not only to support but also create the historical narrative. Šmahel's dialectical approach, his ability to foreground the voice of primary sources in his narrative and at the same time eclipse the theoretical framing, paradoxically saved the applicability of genuinely Marxist concepts. He was part of the exceptionally innovative Hussite studies of the 1960s which still form the basis of contemporary Czech as well as international historiography—and to which no alternative conceptual frame has been developed. Šmahel formulated strong narratives that do not look as such at first sight. His main achievement nevertheless was something else: The many approaches that he introduced into the scholarly debate on Hussitism define the respective historiography till today and will define it for many decades to come.

František Šmahel was already regarded as the most distinguished medievalist in the country in the middle of the 1980s, after he was allowed to quietly resume his scholarly work as an ordinary employee of the Museum of the Hussite Movement in Tábor. Soon after the fall of the Wall this judgement was shared not only by his colleagues and students—who seldom unanimously agree about the qualities of their colleagues and teachers—but more and more by the rest of society. Šmahel already enjoyed an impressive international reputation from the times of his employment at the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in the 1960s. During his enforced retirement from the academic sphere in the 1970s and 1980s, this reputation only improved. Stories about a tram driver visiting academic libraries in his

free time and carefully reading all the newest scholarly literature became, in the first half of the 1990s, the sorts of anecdotes that we students enjoyed most, forgetting that they described a sad and distressing reality. Nevertheless, these stories expressed for us better than anything else what commitment to scholarship meant. Comparing ourselves to František Šmahel always gave us a paragon we could look up to—and this is something that should by no means be underestimated. A student without a teacher to look up to is a student who learns less in terms of personal integrity, moral values, and the ability to keep the higher goal in view.

General social appreciation expressed itself in several high academic offices that Šmahel held during his postcommunist academic career, and more recently in publicly celebrated awards and honors. However, this acclaim is Janus-faced. The impeccable personality of Šmahel as a representative of Czech humanities managed and still manages to cover up many less admirable features of the Czech academic community and discourse: features that seriously endanger the very existence of the Czech humanities today, and which may yet prevail. František Šmahel himself never advocated an idea of revenge or a purge; he even actively opposed it. Yet it was Šmahel, first of all, who experienced the resistance of scholarly mediocre but politically ambitious and skilled academics who dominated the historical disciplines during the so-called “normalization” between 1968 and 1989. Several of Šmahel’s most progressive and well elaborated ideas concerning post-graduate education of junior scholars were derailed. Had these ideas been implemented—especially competition in teaching and the principles of transparent, international, and independent evaluation of scholarly outputs on all career levels—they would have changed the whole scholarly community for decades to come.

The impact of such principles, if executed, would indeed have been great. The Czech scholarly community suffers especially from a problem that could have been overcome with the measures devised by Šmahel: It is a small community, and its internal dynamics prevent any “natural” establishment of transparent and independent evaluation oriented solely on quality. In this, the Czech scholarly community may be compared to the Austrian and Hungarian ones. Austrian



František Šmahel

(Photo: Courtesy of František Šmahel)

scholars are, however, part of a large German-speaking academic community, which makes the point of comparison dramatically different. When comparing the Czech and Hungarian situations, on the other hand, the scholarly and socio-political importance of the Central European University for Hungary and the neighboring postcommunist countries, and for the humanities in these countries, can hardly be overestimated. In the last decades, many graduates from the Central European University have started their academic careers in postcommunist countries. At their institutions, they usually belong among the best-educated, most open-minded, and internationally best-connected scholars. They are helping to raise a new generation of students who are then best prepared for tasks the humanities face in the contemporary world. Last but not least: joining the European Union has brought a dramatic shift in all of the postcommunist scholarly communities, and it is to be hoped that this shift will bear fruit in the near future.

## **Times of Upheaval**

Although the present political situation in the postcommunist countries of Central and East Central Europe is anything but encouraging, let us be optimistic. Let us hope that the legacy of František Šmahel and his colleagues, as scholars and teachers, will inspire the next generation, and in turn, their pupils: “Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man’s dwelling, but a foolish man devours it.” (Prov. 21.20)

*Pavčina Rychterová*



# František Šmahel

in Conversation with  
Pavčina Rychterová

**PAVLČNA RYCHTEROVČ** (PR): *Professor Šmahel, in one of our many debates you said that theory should be based on knowledge of the sources and on confrontation with the sources, but naturally also on inspiration. Can we now, in this interview, devote some time to the “personal” or rather “root” sources from which your scholarly, pedagogical, and literary work has grown?*

**FRANTIŠEK ŠMAHEL** (FŠ): Certainly, but where do I start? Perhaps it is best to recall the earliest memories of my childhood in Trhová Kamenice, a small town on the edge of the Iron Mountains and the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands. I was born there on August 17, 1934, in a large house on the square, where my parents owned a general store. In the living room we had expensive furniture; in the house, hot water, a bathroom, and a flush toilet. This was far from common then. In the photographs from my childhood I look like a well-nourished and well-dressed boy, who even had a metal pedal car. My uncles, brothers of my mother, bought that for me. As heirs to a large farmstead, they did not spare any expense, unlike my father and especially his mother, who were born into straitened circumstances and soon took charge of the business. Only thanks to my mother’s dowry could my father reconstruct the whole house and convert it from a family general store and taproom to a smallish department store. Along with my younger brother, Ivan, I had a carefree childhood, safe from worries and minor marital disagreements, which our parents concealed from us.

**PR:** *What can you tell me about your hometown?*

**FŠ:** Trhová Kamenice had approximately fifteen hundred inhabitants then. Despite this, I counted there two savings banks, six pubs, four butchers, and, besides our store, three others: a grocery, a chemist's, and a general store. The small town had an elementary and a junior secondary school, a cinema, a fire brigade, the active gymnastic organization Sokol, and, after 1945, a Boy Scout club. A major road from Chrudim to Havlíčkův Brod ran through it. Originally, there was to be a railroad running there, but after its redirection to nearby Hlinsko at the end of the nineteenth century, Trhová Kamenice no longer stood a chance of further development. Although the owners of the local steam sawmill and glassworks built two one-story houses for the employees, they had to limit production every now and then. Nearby quarries, operated by my grandfather when I was young, provided work for about twenty men. The local farmers and crofters, whose small fields were not enough for subsistence, worked fallow fields, and their families had to scratch a living knitting hair nets. These home industries were fully controlled by Jewish factors who ran workshops in their homes. At the time of my childhood, Jews in the town formed a closed, rather prosperous community. And because they supported the locals, all remnants of anti-Jewish animosity, which had earlier manifested itself in various forms, were concealed within individual families.

**PR:** *Considering the date of your birth, it is clear that this idyllic well-being, at least as it appears in the recollections of your early childhood, could not have lasted long. Very soon came the Munich Agreement and in March 1939, the occupation of Czechoslovakia.*

**FŠ:** Naturally. I remember the excitement generated by the mobilization of September 24, 1938, only vaguely; after all, I was only four years old. My mother took me the very next Sunday to visit my father in Čáslav, where he had enlisted. It was most likely my first trip by car. However, I remember the beginning of the occupation vividly because it evokes the experience of a fire in the Kamenice town hall. German soldiers appeared in the town immediately on March 15, 1939, and the very same evening, out of carelessness, set fire to the town hall, which

they had occupied just like the school. They helped to put the fire out themselves, but one soldier was injured in a fall from the roof. Four days later, the soldiers left, and after that appeared in the town only on the odd occasion. For the common duties of the Protectorate civil administration, the Czech police sufficed. But I have to say that there were also honest people and patriots among those officials who often closed both eyes, particularly when it came to the black market for food. The surveillance of the community was entrusted to an Aryanizer of the local small Jewish factories, a Sudeten German from Trutnov, originally a barber, whose dolled-up wife looked down on all the natives. Rumor had it that she was the one who most incited her husband against the Czechs.

**PR:** *Did anything change in the town immediately after the occupation? Anything that a very small boy would notice? What impact did the establishment of the “town surveillance” have on the population of Trhová Kamenice?*

**FŠ:** First of all, a bust of President T. G. Masaryk<sup>1</sup> disappeared from a monument in front of the school; soon afterwards, “objectionable books” were removed from the public libraries. German-Czech signs appeared everywhere, also on our doors and shop windows.

Naturally, people were denounced in Kamenice during the war. There were several organized Fascists from the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic. I cannot confirm whether they informed on people, but local denouncers were doing their best, as the Aryanizer testified after the war, though he himself was afraid of the Gestapo and so did not pass on many denouncements.

In February 1940, the arrests began. First it was the turn of my uncle, an officer in the Czechoslovak army, a member of the resistance group “Defense of the Nation” (*Obrana národa*).<sup>2</sup> It was not until a year later that the Gestapo arrested two local communists. Both of them and several other people from the town and from the vicinity died in a

1 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), first president of Czechoslovakia.

2 František Žák (1909–72), staff captain.

## Times of Upheaval

concentration camp. My uncle returned several months after the war, but only the two local comrades became heroes; non-communists did not have a right to collective memory.

**PR:** *How did your father's business fare in those new circumstances?*

**FS:** At the outset, goods from prewar stocks were sold in our shop. They, however, soon disappeared from the counter, including coffee and better fabrics. A rationing system in the form of food coupons was introduced at the beginning of October 1939, and then, in December, coupons for textiles and shoes were also introduced. In the evenings, the whole family would sort the coupons and stick them to small pieces of paper which were handed over to a special office. Everything had to correspond to the allotted amount of goods for sale and stiff penalties were enforced. Profiteering was out of the question. We did not have enough food because we always had an apprentice or shop assistant plus a live-in maid. Our family had certain advantages, however, thanks to sustenance coming from my grandfather's farmstead. Thanks to that, we could from time to time send a package to our relatives in Chrudim or in Prague. Harsh penalties were exacted but people never ceased to show solidarity.

**PR:** *Do you have any specific memories of the war events in the municipality?*

**FS:** A scene from October 1941 impressed itself on my mind, although I did not understand it as a child. Local Jews with suitcases and bundles got into cars in front of our shop and without waving us goodbye left for some unknown place. One of them was a boy, about three years older than me, whom I had been playing with for some time before this event—before the war, he had a nanny who would not allow a factory owner's son to talk to anyone. The day before their departure we met in front of our shop entrance. With tears in his eyes he told me they were leaving the next day and we would never see each other again. He was right. Of the sixteen local Jews, only two returned. My parents did not answer my question about my friend's whereabouts. They were afraid I might say something out of place somewhere.

I always had to go to bed before 9:00 p.m., when my father would listen to BBC News in Czech. All I could then hear were muffled rolls of the kettledrums from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—the wartime signature-tune of the BBC—and at times also the newscaster's closing wishes: "Good night and don't lose hope."<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder my parents were afraid. For spreading news heard on "enemy" radio there was the death penalty from the beginning of the Protectorate, and the danger increased after the assassination of Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich.<sup>4</sup> As I discovered after the war, for that reason my mother burned all the little souvenirs from the Sokol rallies bearing portraits of the presidents of the Czechoslovak Republic and scarves with Sokol symbols.

The news of the defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad gave us hope that the one-thousand-year-old empire of evil would not last forever. We still, however, spent some time hunched over the map in our evening sessions. Colored pins marked the movements of the fronts, which were undulating and shifting in all sorts of ways. The approaching end of the war was portended, *inter alia*, by strikes of English fighter-bombers on trains, overflights of silvery flying units at great heights, and operations of partisan landing forces in the surrounding forests.

The German defenses around Trhová Kamenice were by then largely manned by disabled ex-servicemen from the eastern front, who took care of their seriously wounded and weaker comrades in an infirmary created in our school. SS military formations appeared there more frequently and combed the forests and distant secluded places. One winter day at the beginning of 1945, I saw them through the window bringing in villagers who had used to frequent our shop with hands tied on a sled. Everyone around me was sullen, and mother had tears in her eyes because her classmates were among the arrested helpers of the partisans.

In the last spring of the war, we no longer went to school. Occasionally, however, a local policeman would knock and tell my parents that they were to send their children to pick up propaganda leaflets dropped by the Anglo-American air forces. At the same time, our fathers were

<sup>3</sup> It was a diplomat with a colourful past, Bruce Lockhart (1877–1970).

<sup>4</sup> Reinhard Heydrich (1904–42), chief of the Reich Main Security Office (including the *Gestapo*, *Kripo*, and *SD*), *stellvertretender Reichsprotektor* (Deputy/Acting Reich-Protector) of Bohemia and Moravia.

forced to build tank traps. With the approach of the eastern front, the number of the so-called “national guests,” that is German refugees from Prussia and Upper Silesia, increased in our town. They came with hand baggage, and waited in the town square until the owners of the larger houses took them in by order of the town council. The scene with the Jewish fellow citizens repeated itself outside our windows, only with different actors. We were assigned two elderly ladies who hardly ever left the house. They were bitter and visibly frightened. They cooked for themselves, but from time to time we gave them things from our kitchen. I took the food to them, and this was an opportunity for a beginner to practice German conversation. I did not have obligatory German in elementary school, which started in sixth grade. It was not until many years later that I saw what an advantage my slightly older colleagues had gained in that way. My poor ability to express myself in German is on the conscience of my uncle, a secondary school teacher of German, with whom I lived after the war. “František,” he told me, “study English—you won’t ever need German in your life.” How wrong this admirer of Goethe and German literature would be!

A few days before the end of the war the “national guests” silently disappeared from our town. After some time, in peacetime, a second wave of German refugees arrived. Their status had changed: from “national guests” they had become laborers, who worked for the large-scale farmers for food and a roof over their head. At my grandfather’s farm, the family of a once-wealthy owner of a homestead from East Prussia was billeted. They worked in silence from dawn to dusk, and my grandpa clearly respected them. I sometimes rode out to the fields with an elderly farmer. Two of his daughters usually sat in the carriage; I remember that they were both supremely beautiful.

**PR:** *How did you experience the end of the war and liberation by the Soviet army in Trhová Kamenice?*

**FŠ:** At the end of the war, some people in the hitherto peaceful small town rallied to a call of Prague Radio to rise up and take military action against the German occupants. On May 5, with a revolver and a hunting rifle, they disarmed the invalid personnel of the infirmary.

As a result, they acquired more weapons and in the evening fended off a punitive German expedition that had approached the town. In that incident, four Germans, two of their allies from the formation of General Vlasov,<sup>5</sup> and one of the Czech fighters were killed. Of the wounded natives, a local windbag impressed himself on my mind, who always had to be in the thick of things and who then pretended to be a hero for years. The actual leader of this rebellion soon married a German woman, which even his patriotic father held against him for years.

The same May evening my parents allowed me to go to the square. I stopped at the church when a cry rang out: "The Germans are coming!" and grandpa's farmhand shouted at me: "Scram!" We both ran to the fields and then returned shamefacedly. Instead of Germans, tricolor-decorated Czechs with rifles had arrived from the neighboring town. The Germans appeared with heavy weapons three days later, and soon eleven corpses lay in the town and the neighboring village, including a brave Catholic priest.

The next day, May 9, 1945, we again hid in the cellars. Instead of Germans, this evening it was the Russians who came. We welcomed them with bunches of lilacs. In the following days, revenge was taken on the local Germans and their collaborators. The Sudeten Aryanizer and his wife did not escape in time. They were forced to get into a cart and ride through a street of shame. The same happened to a pretty young woman who had been courted by German officers. Nobody hurt them in any way, only a few loudmouths who had never stuck their heads out the door before tried to spit on them. Soon afterwards, on May 11, three soldiers of the Armed SS were executed at the local mill. Shortly before that, they had killed a gamekeeper and his wife in a nearby village. With this, the war ended for us.

The first motorized Russian units quickly drove through Kamenice. People welcomed them warmly. These sincere feelings changed very much when the town was occupied by infantry units with primitive looking cars and horse-drawn carts. I was a witness in the square of the arrest of a Russian soldier who had stolen something. It was said

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5 Andrey Vlasov (1901–46), Russian Red Army general, head of the so-called Russian Liberation Army.

that he was shot summarily behind the barns. The regimental commander with his partner, cook, and whole suite was billeted in our large house. We had to let them have a room with a view of the square and the kitchen. My little brother Ivan was, thanks to his Russian name, their favorite and was always riding with them in a car while I had to walk with the cook for nettles, which he used in large quantities to prepare their meals.

**PR:** *How did life then change in the postwar small town?*

**FŠ:** Everywhere—on the square, in the streets, and in the fields—cars and military vehicles could be seen, which the fleeing Germans had abandoned when they had ran out of petrol. Horses were also running about there, and one of them even had a saddle and I brought it home. To my great sorrow, my father ordered me to take the horse to my grandfather's stables, from which it was taken to the nearest barracks. It was then possible to find weapons everywhere, such as submachine guns, munitions, grenades, and bazookas. Soon two of my mates paid for playing with them: one lost a hand, the other was torn to pieces by a grenade.

Otherwise, the spring and summer months of 1945 are associated in my mind with incessant triumphal marches and celebrations. All the Sokol members took their traditional costumes from hiding places; I proudly wore a green Scout shirt, and later I procured a backwoodsman's hat. On the radio, we listened every evening to news about liberated concentration camp prisoners and Czechoslovak formations stationed abroad. We also heard the voice of my uncle, who survived the end of the war in the concentration camp Hammeln, near Hannover. I proudly accompanied him in a welcome march when he returned to our town in English uniform. None of us would have imagined that my uncle would soon find himself behind barbed wire again, in a concentration camp at a uranium mine.

The three postwar years passed quickly. Our town formally welcomed President Beneš,<sup>6</sup> whom I saw with my own eyes for the first time, but one could sense something strange in the wind. From snatch-

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6 Edvard Beneš (1884–1948), president of Czechoslovakia (1935–38, 1945–48).



es of conversations around the family table I remember fears about future developments. Nothing was threatening us directly, but the heady atmosphere of free life was gone.

I was a quick learner, so my parents decided that I would go to secondary school. The most accessible was a realgymnasium (a science-oriented secondary school) in Chrudim, about twenty kilometers away. Since there was no daily bus connection yet, a great change awaited me as I would live in lodgings and only went home on weekends. I lived with the family of my father's cousin who taught German, Czech, and basic Latin at the school. My uncle was already retired, as was my aunt, one of the first female students of physical education and geography at Charles University in Prague. On the recommendation of my uncle, I took entrance examinations for the third year, where tuition of Latin starts. I therefore experienced "the victory of the Czechoslovak working people," as the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia labelled its putsch in 1948, in Chrudim. I knew something about the tense political situation at the age of fourteen, but I was slightly confused when I heard sirens calling a general strike on the way from school.

My uncle and aunt did not lose heart even after it became clear that the communists held the power firmly in their hands. At first, my uncle and aunt had confidence in President Beneš, and even after his abdication they still believed that the Western powers would not leave us at the mercy of the Soviets. People had anecdotal and conflicting information about the real situation in Stalin's empire. Listening to foreign radios began again, but only in some families.

In my native town, where I commuted to and from, Saturday evening and Sunday, the new regime only manifested itself by a change of the people at the town hall.<sup>7</sup> The times were hard and even my good, hardworking father took the communist bait. During a mass enlistment campaign he joined the party, only to be expelled from it immediately as a sole trader and therefore "bourgeois." Despite that, he still believed the communist leaders saying that small businesses had nothing to fear. In the end, after two years, he had only a few empty bags with the label "Šmahel's coffee tastes the best" left of the business.

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7 Saturday was still a business and school day then.

**PR:** *What was the communist confiscation of the business like?*

**FŠ:** The store with all the goods was “nationalized” and a local, not very successful merchant was appointed as administrator. He was clearly happy that he could boss my father around. Products that the local powers that be were not interested in were loaded onto a lorry and dumped into an old quarry. My father took the loss of his whole life’s work bitterly, and more so as he had no choice but to take employment as a sales assistant in his former shop. In consequence, he died heart-broken in 1956 when he was only fifty-seven years old.

My mother then had to muck out and milk the cows early in the morning at her parents’ confiscated farm, which the communists turned into a unified farmers’ cooperative, the Czechoslovak equivalent of the Soviet collective farm. If she had refused, there would have been the risk that her parents would be expelled from their house. For a number of years, she bore her cruel fate bravely and with dignity, and became a role model for me during the hard times. My grandfather was branded a “kulak”<sup>8</sup> during the campaign against “kulaks.” We were always anxious whether this would not lead to the eviction of the entire family. The shop windows in the Chrudim high street became at that time a pillory of a special kind. Behind the glass, a seated person could be seen with the sign “kulak” or “profiteer” hanging around their neck. Confiscated goods were scattered around them. Sometimes they were foodstuffs, other times swatches of fabrics and piles of other goods. I was gripped by the fear that one day I might see behind the glass of shame my own grandfather or father because it was easy to find in our attic various odds and ends and long-unsaleable goods. Luckily, that never happened.

Disasters of all kinds did not, however, befall only my family. My first wife’s father was a mayor in a small North Bohemian town, and because he was a Social Democrat, he was immediately arrested in February 1948 by an action committee of the Communist Party and imprisoned for a long time without trial. As punishment they also re-

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8 Large-scale farmers were then branded as kulaks. *Kulak* is a Russian term for a relatively rich or affluent farmer.

fused to admit his talented daughter to secondary school. Only thanks to an intervention of her aunt, an honest person though a dyed-in-the-wool party official, was she allowed to study. My second wife's half-brother was executed at the age of eighteen for activities "hostile to the state."<sup>9</sup> To this day, we do not know where he was buried. What his parents went through is hard to imagine. Although the village—and this was very rare then—stood up for the boy's father, the director of the local school, and his wife (who was a teacher), the district council decided that the family had to move out.

These were bad times and they left their mark on many people. One morning, I was called from the classroom to the hallway, where my best friend's aunt was waiting. She begged me in tears to go immediately to see my friend in Kamenice. I heard the terrible news at home: my friend had found his father hanged in the attic. He cut him down himself—he was fifteen years old—carried him downstairs and prepared him for the coffin. The reason for the suicide was in the suicide note. Shortly before, his father had been arrested and immediately released with the task of founding a unified farmers' cooperative in the town. This happened under the threat of many years of imprisonment for alleged subversive activities. This farmer, who was respected by everybody, took his life to save the honor of himself and of his children.

**PR:** *You saw all this through a child's eyes.*

**FŠ:** I see what you mean. My own memories are supplemented in places with stories of my parents and the municipal chronicle. After all, what can I remember from before the year 1939? Six years of war followed, or more precisely, the Protectorate. You are eleven and the war ends. As a child, you witness events, but you cannot reflect on them yet. Only, you find it strange that people cheer and march from the Sokol building to the other end of the town with a band. A child sees and commits things to memory. This may be an everyday experience like a village funeral. In a funeral procession going from the small church to

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9 Zbyněk Janata (1932–55) was condemned to death and executed as a member of the anticommunist resistance group, the so-called Mašín brothers.

the cemetery I saw a young widow mourning the death of her husband. I felt sorry for her and I felt sad. Then, in the evening, I saw her drink and dance in the pub where my father sent me to get a tankard of beer. As a boy, I could not work this out. It was only much later that I understood in what strange ways unhappy memories are blocked out. I am mentioning this as an example of how many things enter an historian's mind all the time, if he is at least a little perceptive, and he may or may not use them in his work.

**PR:** *In those days you probably did not have any inkling that your life's work would be history. What actually led you to its study?*

**FŠ:** My parents had a relatively well-stocked library; my mother was an avid reader, and my father purchased expensive pictorial publications through which I often flipped when I was a boy. At the Chru-dim gymnasium, I was one of the better students and my uncle saw to it that I was properly prepared for tuition, testing me in Latin, guiding me to serious reading, and talking to me like to an adult. I happily sat in a rocking chair and read and read, out of interest, with the half-baked idea that an educated person simply must know the Czech and world classics. My self-educational obsession was not limited to literature. I listened to records on an old gramophone with a crank, and I did not miss any of the concerts which always took place one Friday of the month. I myself had played the violin since my childhood, later with much enthusiasm—I played an hour a day for my uncle who lay motionless for almost a year after a stroke until he was freed by death. However, I lacked the necessary talent, and also I would rather have played the piano. In Kamenice, I led a singing group on Sundays and during holidays, played in a small dance orchestra, and as a fifth-grader I even lectured on Bedřich Smetana at the local social club.

In the teacher's family, with which I had lived for six years in Chru-dim, they talked openly about everything at the table. My aunt sometimes had free-thinking insights, while my uncle was uncompromising in his opinions. Both remembered the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic, but my uncle was critical of President Masaryk for his

high-handed ways. I always listened attentively, without realizing how these table discussions were expanding my horizons. Occasionally, I expressed my opinions, which smacked of socialist egalitarianism, to my aunt and uncle. I went through a period when feelings prevailed over rational thinking and over the perception of opposing, exhorting voices, of which there were more than enough in the extended family.

**PR:** *Where did you get those socialistic egalitarian ideas? Given your bourgeois-cum-tradesman origin, this is hard to understand.*

**FŠ:** Well, here we have to go back to my childhood. Do not forget that I only got into a real bourgeois family when I was twelve. My family was partly rural: my mother was from a farm, my father was a tradesman who did well in business to run a department store, and my grandfather was a proud owner of farmstead.

I had to go to church on Sunday with my family, as my father demanded that. By contrast, my mother's family did not want to have anything to do with the Church. Sometime before the end of the war, I became a religious believer. It might have been due to the local Catholic priest, who managed to inspire a child's mind. I left the Roman Catholic Church immediately after coming of age and provocatively announced this to my father. It hurt him deeply as he sought solace in his burdensome existence in the faith. To this day I regret how rashly I acted. I rejected one faith and succumbed to another—Marxism. Like many others who grew up in a relatively wealthy milieu, I had noticed as a child that there were many people who were worse off. Then, I saw social consciousness at home. My father was known far and wide as a compassionate man who gave the poor goods on credit. Most of the debts remained unpaid but his reputation remained intact, particularly after February 1948, when nobody attacked my father for class reasons. At least, I do not know of any such attack.

My tendency to Marxism probably had something to do with the fact that when I had left the Church, all of a sudden I felt a vacuum inside. I no longer had something to believe in. And I had fallen for that; I had liked it as a youth. It suited me that I could show that I had the courage of my convictions. In this I was the only black sheep in our ex-

tended family. And everyone, everyone shook their heads. Some said, “He will get over this.” Others said, “Why does he go to sing *chastushkas*<sup>10</sup> when his grandfather is a kulak?”

**PR:** *Let us return to your studies. What did your school years give you? What led you to the study of history?*

**FŠ:** Some teachers impressed me permanently. At the lower gymnasium, I still had Latin and Czech teachers from the First Republic who did not hesitate to flunk half the class. The writer of psychological novels Miroslav Hanuš,<sup>11</sup> who was our teacher of history, taught us subjects that he thought were important, regardless of the curriculum and the possible penalties. In the fifth year he lectured us about the life and death of the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus<sup>12</sup> based on a monograph by the Evangelical nonconformist historian František Michálek Bartoš.<sup>13</sup> I remembered for all my life episodes from Hus’s life, notwithstanding that Master Jerome of Prague<sup>14</sup> had captured my attention at that time. It happened through a letter of Poggio Bracciolini<sup>15</sup> about Jerome’s death in Constance, which Professor Hanuš read to us in a gripping translation by František Palacký.<sup>16</sup> But I had no idea then that I would one day specialize in the Hussite movement as a historian.

On the contrary, it was the Renaissance that I fell for. I read everything that I could find about it; I browsed through art books borrowed

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<sup>10</sup> The *chastushka* is a Russian type of improvised folk song. Appreciated by Stalin, it became a metaphor in the Czech republic for the invasion of Soviet Russian culture in the years after the communist putsch.

<sup>11</sup> Miroslav Hanuš (1907–95), Czech teacher, author.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Hus (c.1369–1415), Czech theologian, founder of the religious reform movement, executed as heretic at the council of Constance, name giver of the medieval religious sect of hussites.

<sup>13</sup> F. M. Bartoš (1889–1972), historian; František Michálek Bartoš, *Čechy v době Husově, 1378–1415* [Bohemia in the time of Hus, 1378–1415], *České dějiny* 2/6 (Prague: Laichter, 1947).

<sup>14</sup> Jerome of Prague (c.1380–1416), Czech theologian, associate of Hus, executed as heretic at the council of Constance.

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), Italian scholar, humanist, who wrote his letter to the Florentine chancellor Leonard Bruni of Arezzo on the day of the death of Jerome of Prague, i.e., May 30, 1416.

<sup>16</sup> František Palacký (1798–1876), Czech historian and politician, included the translation of Poggio’s letter in the third volume of his *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě* [The history of the Bohemian nation in Bohemia and Moravia], vol. 3, *Od roku 1403 až do roku 1439* [From 1403 to 1439] (Prague: Kvasnička a Hampl, 1939). Several editions exist today.

from the school library and the municipal library. I started to excerpt data rather amateurishly, and I bought my first index-card box with my savings. Oriental art also interested me, particularly Japanese and Chinese painting. All the greater was my disappointment when I was told before the recruitment board that I could not distinguish between two opposite tones on the color scale. In my naiveté I judged that study of the fine arts was denied to me by fate, but I soon had other, much more serious concerns.

**PR:** *From your curriculum vitae I know that you were not recommended for university because of your class profile.*

**FŠ:** One week before my school-leaving exam, my uncle, my mother's brother, the same one who spent five years in a Nazi concentration camp for being in the resistance movement, was sentenced to sixteen years in prison. It was only much later that I found out from him what he had done. One evening, over a glass of wine, a younger officer tried to persuade him to escape with him to the West. Being an officer of the old school, my uncle warned him that he should not toy with such plans and should forget all about them. He had no idea that it was an agent-provocateur testing his reliability. And because he did not denounce his colleague, he had committed high treason.

During my school-leaving examination a "deputy of the people," who was always a high functionary or a member of the secret police, asked me what I thought of my uncle's despicable act. By coincidence, he had acted as investigator at my uncle's trial and going through my dossier discovered our relationship. I answered him truthfully that I knew nothing of my uncle's conviction, which was true because my parents purposefully hid the conviction of my uncle from me, so that I could concentrate on my preparations for the school-leaving examination. Nevertheless, the issue proved to be fatal for me. My plan to read history in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University was rejected by the commissioner in question. Although the teaching staff supported me bravely, the school-leaving commission recommended that I study Chinese, a subject in which I could do no ideological harm. I was pushing on nineteen and I had many illusions and little experience. I refused

immediately to study a subject which I had not chosen, and I said that I would apply for history again the next year. To assure my admittance to university, I signed up at once for a year-long “temporary assignment” in the Ostrava mines, in the north-east of the country.

**PR:** *You could surely have begun to study Chinese and then switched to another subject.*

**F5:** You are right; I realized this only later. The mines were a much tougher ordeal than I could have imagined. In those days, the Ostrava agglomeration was reminiscent of the Klondike at the time of Jack London.<sup>17</sup> Anything could happen there; money and blood were flowing in the streets. But, on the other hand, there was also an excellent opera house there.

In one year, I saw more of *condicio humana* than I had bargained for. My views of history began to take shape in the Ostrava mines, under conditions in many ways reminiscent of Zola’s “Hell.”<sup>18</sup> In the first two months, several shocking experiences were in store for me. There were metal bunkbeds in the lodging house. There was no privacy there; some temporary workers took to bed brazen and wretched prostitutes, whom they then offered to the others. As we worked shifts, it was not possible to sleep peacefully, and reading was practically out of the question, although I bought a small lamp for my upper bunk. There were dubious characters, released thieves and former German soldiers, who after being freed from Soviet captivity returned to their native Těšín or Opava district. Nobody rushed to work, and the mine overseer turned a blind eye to this.

The leader of the so-called Brigade of Socialist Labor, to whom I was assigned after some time, found me an accommodation in a different place, where I could now keep my private things under lock and key and I even had a separate table. For what was then a high wage, six or seven times the income of my father, I could buy books in the local second-hand bookshop. I bought rare volumes of the editorial series of

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<sup>17</sup> Jack London (1867–1916), US-American author.

<sup>18</sup> Émile Zola’s *Germinal* describes the coal mines in the north of France like Dante’s *Inferno*.



Laichter's *Bohemian History*, which are indispensable for a historian.<sup>19</sup> I should add that the majority of the miners and other workers earned much less. Our competent foreman knew how to organize the work, and unlike the other work groups, we did not change shifts above ground but down the mine. By dint of this we actually worked twenty-four hours and not only seventeen or eighteen.

In our working party the rule "all for one" truly applied, which I experienced twice in person. In one case, the miners on our shift saved my life when I fell several dozen meters into a pulp mill. In the second, our influential foreman stood up for me when I was falsely accused of sabotage.

I believed that I had reliably assured my admittance to university. But great was my disillusionment when the director of the personnel department of the Ostrava-Karviná Regional Coal District informed me that, as a child of a bourgeois family, he would recommend me for university study, at the earliest, after ten years of work in the mine. Tears welled up in my eyes; everything seemed lost to me. I left the office in silence. A man came out to meet me in the hallway, and introduced himself as the director's deputy. He told me that he appreciated my efforts and would help me, but it would be necessary to waive in writing all of the allowances and benefits which I had as a miner. Without the bat of an eyelid, I signed a statement saying that I was giving up all of the financial benefits, which totaled five-times the annual wage. Then, there was nothing to do but wait. The invitation to the entrance examination came from the Philosophical-Historical Faculty, and at the end of May 1954, I just turned from a miner to a student of history.<sup>20</sup>

**PR:** *So you then had, as a future university student, holidays again.*

**FŠ:** Yes. I took them with a feeling of relief and anticipation. Like several years before, I spent the larger part in temporary jobs. Before, I had once worked in a quarry, another time I plastered a cowshed in a

19 This Positivist-conceived *České dějiny* (Bohemian history, a total of sixteen volumes to the year 1464) remains a valuable source of knowledge.

20 The Faculty of Arts of Charles University was divided from the school year 1952–53 into the Philosophical-Historical Faculty and the Philological Faculty. The two faculties were again merged by a reform in 1960.

nearby village; this time I worked as a driver's mate for a dairy. My parents were happy about my success, but they lived modestly and worried about my younger siblings.

My parents could not maintain me in Prague, so it came as a relief to them when I assured them that I had saved money for all of my studies. I really managed to be independent of home during all of my studies with the help of my savings, merit scholarships, and social stipends. After all, this was necessary because in 1956, when I was twenty-two years old, my father died prematurely, and my mother had to accept the harsh fate of a widow and maintain her two dependent children.

**PR:** *What were your first steps and feelings in Prague?*

**FŠ:** I studied without any problems. Like everyone else, I was bored by the obligatory lectures and seminars on the history of the VKSB and Marxism-Leninism.<sup>21</sup> Every Monday, I dressed in uniform for military service, which took part in the faculty classrooms and at a distant parade ground. During my studies I scarcely missed a single performance in the Prague theaters, which had a good reputation. Other than the National Theater, I regularly attended the newly founded theatre *Na zábradlí* (Theater on the Balustrade) and "D," the theater of E. F. Burian,<sup>22</sup> whose scenic invention captivated me. Once, I even interpreted an interview for two hours, which this famous dramatist willingly gave to a French colleague. I visited quite often the National Gallery; otherwise, there were few interesting exhibitions, because nonconformist artists could not exhibit their work. Thanks to my colleague Dušan Třeštík,<sup>23</sup> who knew the young, not-yet-known sculptor Jan Koblása,<sup>24</sup> I could see one of his unofficial exhibitions at the Žofín Palace. After some fifty years, I met the already internationally famous master at the Prague Castle, where we received Medals of Merit from the hands of President Václav Havel.<sup>25</sup>

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21 This was the *Všesvazová Komunistická strana bolševiků* (All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks), the history of which was literally explained according to the translated Soviet textbook.

22 Emil František Burian (1904–59), Czech writer, actor, playwright, director.

23 Dušan Třeštík (1933–2007), Czech historian.

24 Jan Koblása (b.1932), Czech sculptor.

25 Václav Havel (1936–2011), president of the Czech Republic (1993–2003).

**PR:** *What were your university studies like?*

**FŠ:** I once said or wrote that I was self-taught. This was, of course, only partially true. The majority of the professors and associate professors from the First Republic were at the time of my studies either dead or fired from the faculty for political reasons. Instruction was essentially led by assistants, who had largely studied in the previous system, so that they could pass on the standard methods and knowledge to the students in the exercises and seminars. However, this only applied to subjects that ideological considerations had not yet infiltrated.

They included auxiliary historical sciences, whose department had recently been made independent within the faculty structure, and I later went over to join it. It was ruled by the patriarch Václav Vojtíšek,<sup>26</sup> an ardent nationalist, one of the academicians of the old school whom the regime needed for the newly established Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences adapted to the Soviet model, so that it would acquire some reputation. I was not one of the old gentleman's favorites, but I gained some extremely valuable information at his seminars, which often came in handy. This was also the merit of the fresh assistant and my lifelong friend, Ivan Hlaváček,<sup>27</sup> who brought to the operations of the department his exceptional erudition combined with prodigious memory.

In the first year I was also attending the history department, when Associate Professor Josef Polišenský,<sup>28</sup> whose subject was the general history of the Early Modern Period, chose me for his seminar. He was one of the few Czech historians to be known abroad. When he heard of my interest, he entrusted me with various tasks, from procuring books to babysitting in the evening. Polišenský probably recommended me for the post of secretary of the newly established Student Scholarly Society,<sup>29</sup> associating students who wanted to devote themselves to history. Besides that, I had just begun to publish and already by the second year had won an award in a competition for new historical

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26 Václav Vojtíšek (1883–1974), Czech historian.

27 Ivan Hlaváček (b.1931), Czech historian.

28 Josef Polišenský (1915–2001), Czech historian.

29 The Student Scientific Society has so far escaped the attention of historians, although numerous lectures and discussions took place within its framework.

works organized by the editors of the *South Bohemian Historical Anthology* (*Jihočeský sborník historický*). Thanks to that, I gained a certain reputation, which made it possible for me to spend some time in France, which I had not imagined even in my wildest dreams.

**PR:** *It was probably your first trip to the West. Considering the political situation, it must have been a truly exceptional event. What preceded it?*

**F5:** Certainly, it was my first trip, because the West lay behind the impenetrable Iron Curtain. The revelation of the horrors of Stalin's cult by Khrushchev in 1956, however, brought about some alleviation of the political pressure. At least, so it seemed, in Prague.

Whereas writers raised their heads at their second congress in April 1956, František Graus<sup>30</sup> published in *Literární noviny* the treatise "On the Position of History in Cultural Life," in which he spoke against the "prostitution of history."<sup>31</sup> His considerations excited much interest, because until that time Graus had been one of the party hatchet men and had unwaveringly professed historical materialism and Stalinist dialectics. In his defense, it should be added that like a number of young Jewish intellectuals who survived the Holocaust, he considered Marxism as a buttress of the state system, which once and for all removed the dangers of fascism and Nazism.

The Czech "early spring," however, went to rack and ruin in the same year, after the Soviet intervention in Hungary. Only during this brief interlude could five Czech students visit the free world.

At the beginning, there was an invitation to a research fellowship from the Association of Students of History at the Sorbonne in Paris, received by the Faculty of Arts in Prague in the spring of 1956.<sup>32</sup> Such a delicate affair naturally had to be discussed by the powers-to-be, at least by the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Youth Union (the com-

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<sup>30</sup> František Graus (1921–89), Czech historian.

<sup>31</sup> František Graus, "O postavení historie v kulturním životě" [On the position of history in cultural life], *Literární Noviny* 15 (1956): 3.

<sup>32</sup> The *Groupement des étudiants d'histoire* (G.E.H.) was part of the *Fédération des étudiants de lettres* (F.G.E.L.) at the Sorbonne and, by extension, of the *Union nationale des étudiants de France* (U.N.E.F.).

munist youth organization). I found out about the invitation in accidental and unusual circumstances on the fourth floor of the women's dormitory in Opletalova Street. It happened around midnight when I met the president of the communist student union in the hallway. He was surprised and taken aback, because in his position he had broken the dormitory rules more than I had, as I was not a party member. His question whether I wanted to go to Paris sounded to me like coming from another planet. I probably would not have attached any importance to it if I had not met him the next day on the faculty staircase. The question "Well, how about Paris?" visibly surprised him. Not having another choice, he gave me a questionnaire with the assurance that in any case I would be only the second reserve in the five-member delegation.

The rest of the story I only know from hearsay. The first reserve found out that one of the "elect" had already visited a capitalist country and therefore requested that he be removed. Someone "upstairs" decided wisely: while two argue, another reserve will go. Well, at the last moment I was invited to the foreign department of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, where, inter alia, I received instructions about dealing with obtrusive Parisian prostitutes. I also met the other members of the selected group there. The role of spokesperson went to Karel Bartošek,<sup>33</sup> a senior lecturer in history of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, whom I had already met at the gymnasium in Chrudim. His assistant was Jiří Burian,<sup>34</sup> a student of art history, who was famous for his good command of several languages. The rest of us were worse off in this regard.

I quickly learned French through Latin from the textbook of Rocher-Skála, which had the consequence that my ponderous utterances were close to the language spoken at the time of Villon. One of my Parisian colleagues told me this.

**PR:** *What was the journey like and what were your feelings and impressions from it? What did it do for you?*

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<sup>33</sup> Karel Bartošek (1930–2004), Czech historian.

<sup>34</sup> Jiří Burian (b.1933).

**F5:** After a noisy welcome at Gare de l'Est we went to our temporary lodgings. I was to stay with the family of the historian Albert Soboul,<sup>35</sup> who was just then finishing a lengthy dissertation on the Parisian sans-culottes supervised by the famous Georges Lefebvre.<sup>36</sup> Although he was an active communist, Soboul was expected to carve out a brilliant academic career. The majority of our hosts from the ranks of the Students' Association were leftists, but not all. I made friends with Jean-Louis Colas, a future right-wing politician, when he sought me out for being non-aligned. We were the focus of attention from all sides, and not only from the colleagues who had been selected for a reciprocal visit to Prague.

During the twelve days, we did not have a single free moment. An unexpected experience was our attendance of a session of the National Assembly with subsequent reception in the office of Roger Garaudy.<sup>37</sup> At that time, Garaudy was famous as a non-conformist philosopher, whose Marxism was considered more provocative in the East than in France. Wherever we found ourselves, we were always asked to join in discussions, with Trotskyites or with Zionists. For the most part, we did not pass muster: for instance, we did not know much about Franz Kafka,<sup>38</sup> about whom we were questioned.

Not even cultural experiences got short shrift. I could still retrace a tour of the Louvre according to my notes in the guide. For the first time I had an opportunity to see how the original of a famous painting is impressive in comparison with its reproduction. I discovered an entirely new world of colors and shapes at the preview of an exhibition by Jean Lurçat.<sup>39</sup> I went back again and again to the tapestries of this master, who spoke to us briefly during our visit, to experience and enjoy again the original pleasure. Besides Corneille's *Cid* at the Comédie Française, we saw an evening performance by the mime Marcel Marceau,<sup>40</sup> who

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35 Albert Soboul (1914–82), French historian.

36 Georges Lefebvre (1874–1959), French historian. See the published dissertation by Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II: Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793–9 thermidor an II* (Paris: Librairie Clavreuil, 1960).

37 Roger Garaudy (1913–2012), French politician and philosopher.

38 Franz Kafka (1883–1924), German-speaking Bohemian Jewish novelist and short story writer, one of the major authors of 20th-century literature.

39 Jean Lurçat (1892–1966), French artist.

40 Marcel Marceau (1923–2007), French actor and mime.

shortly before that had enjoyed popularity in the USA with his “Bip the Clown.”

Our hosts wanted to show us Paris from all angles. They took us to an otherwise private show of new fashion models at the palace of Christian Dior. To this day I remember the astonishment of the hostesses as they took our cheap coats. A trip to Vincennes, where we ate nothing but bananas the whole day, was a special experience. In comparison with the Prague prices, they cost us peanuts. We even found the time for a tour of the new plants of the state car maker Renault in Billancourt.

Everything happened extremely fast and in Prague we then had a lot to write about. Karel Bartošek published our common souvenirs in the magazine *Univerzita Karlova* (Charles University), my “Memories from Paris” was printed in *Mladá fronta* (Young Front), whereas *Lidová demokracie* (People’s Democracy) carried my column about the evening in the Parisian theaters. But I was most grateful when my teacher Josef Polišenský called on me to include my Paris experiences in his treatise on the study of history in Great Britain and the Netherlands, from where he had just returned.<sup>41</sup>

**PR:** *What else was in store for you in that troubled year of 1956?*

**FŠ:** After returning to Prague from Třeboň, where I spent the whole summer in the famous archive, I felt a kind of expectation in the air. The disappointment from domestic developments, after the promising Second Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, was mixed with excitement evoked by the return of Władysław Gomułka<sup>42</sup> to the forefront of Polish politics and the reports from an uneasy Hungary. It was precisely in Budapest that I had the next, ten-day sojourn, which Polišenský organized for his students in October. I shared a room in a dormitory in Budapest with Dušan Třeštík, with whom I became better acquainted on this occasion.

The ubiquitous sculptural monuments and large-scale canvases of historical paintings, both accenting modern and ancient Hungarian

<sup>41</sup> František Šmahel and Josef Polišenský, “Studium historie ve V. Británii, v Nizozemí a ve Francii” [The study of history in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France], *Dějepis ve škole* 4 (1957): 111–15.

<sup>42</sup> Władysław Gomułka (1905–82), Polish politician.

history, harmonized with the atmosphere of street gatherings of the Petőfi Circles and fora.<sup>43</sup> We attended one or two such meetings passively, although none of us, as far as I remember, knew any Hungarian. Shortly after our departure, a massive demonstration, the Hungarian Uprising, started on October 23, 1956, at the monument of Sándor Petőfi.<sup>44</sup> I only realized the seriousness of the situation when I was back in Prague again. We arrived at night, which I remember well, because after entering the dormitory the reflectors directed at the entrance dazzled me. On both sides of the hallway stood policemen who identified those arriving and allowed them into the dormitory only after they had their identity confirmed by a functionary from the party or the dormitory. The socialist regime had begun to fear its own students. One of the consequences of the Hungarian events was also abolition of military training at universities. My age group was badly hurt by this measure, because our two-year conscription was only shortened by two months for the two years of training we had already completed.

But after a short time, the Communist Party and the government could breathe a sigh of relief. The Czech and Slovak students, who had threatened the government with provocative happenings and two petitions during the May festival in 1956, again became indifferent. By then, one year after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, it was again possible to go on student excursions. I went on one, again organized by Polišíenský, to Poland, in the summer of 1957.

In Poland, one could still feel the last quivers of the political thaw, ended by the invasion of Hungary. We discovered with surprise what things could be written in the press; here and there it was even possible to buy an interesting book.

**PR:** *Can you tell me more about the Student Scholarly Society founded in 1956? It was very active and organized annual conferences and regular lectures. You held the post of secretary in it, right?*

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43 Petőfi's circle—named after Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849), Hungarian poet—was created on the initiative of young Hungarian communists in April 1956 and soon became an important political forum with its public activity.

44 On the young researchers' foreign stays, see Šmahel, "K cestám mladých vědeckých pracovníků do zahraničí," 64–65.



**FŠ:** The management of the faculty supported the student research activity, but the union and party functionaries were on guard. Although they did not make clear their animosity, they regarded the students' spontaneous interest in this society as hidden elitism. It is characteristic that we organized everything in the committee of the Society ourselves and the teachers only attended the lectures and annual conferences out of their own interest. The discussions were relatively free, but it should be noted that the topics of the papers did not provide much opportunity for ideological deviations, because with some exceptions they related to earlier history. The majority of those lecturers later become active scholars and respected experts.

**PR:** *Of your university professors, you have already mentioned Václav Vojtišek, the archivist with heart and soul, and Josef Polišenský, the expert on the Early Modern Period. Who guided you at that time to medieval studies?*

**FŠ:** At the time of my studies in the second half of the 1950s, two leading medievalists and members of the Academy of Sciences, Josef Macek<sup>45</sup> and František Graus, did not yet work in the faculty. Both were relatively young, but their works were compulsory reading, so they were classics of Czech Marxist historiography.

Associate Professor Josef Macek had been appointed at the age of thirty as director of the Institute of History and was a laureate of the state prize for his book *The Hussite Revolutionary Movement*.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, he did little teaching, as he had no time for it, but he would have taught gladly, and I think that the university would have been his rightful sphere of activity. He was a great raconteur and knew how to expound history.

Once, I made an appointment with him to ask him to deliver a lecture at the Student Scholarly Society. I think he lectured on the Tyrolean hero of the German Peasants' War, Michael Gaismair.<sup>47</sup> He spoke

45 Josef Macek (1922–91), Czech medievalist.

46 Josef Macek, *Husitské revoluční hnutí* [The Hussite revolutionary movement], Za svobodu lidu 6 (Prague: Rovnost, 1956).

47 See the monograph by Macek, *Tyrolská selská válka a Michal Gaismair* [The Tyrolean Peasants' War and Michael Gaismair] (Prague: Československá Akad. Věd, 1960). The German edition came out in Berlin in 1965 under the title *Der Tiroler Bauernkrieg und Michael Gaismair*.

off the cuff, in a sophisticated fashion, and with complete absorption. By then I was aware that he was a natural-born historian, a narrator of great epic tales. The obvious pathos of his books and verbal manifestations had their source in an honest tendency to the teachings of Marxism-Leninism.

František Graus was, unlike the raconteur Macek, analytically minded and knew how to analyze sources. As I have already mentioned, he awoke politically before Macek. The moment he realized, however, how much his pro-reform article in *Literární noviny* had been ahead of its time, he withdrew into his shell and devoted himself fully to historical topics. At first, he published in 1957 a second volume of *Rural People in Bohemia in the Pre-Hussite Period*,<sup>48</sup> a monograph that commanded respect with the extent of the source background materials. It was only many years later, during my own work on the topic of land holdings in the Bohemian countryside, that I discovered its methodological weaknesses, which stemmed from the concept of all-determining class struggle. Yet, at the time about which we are speaking, František Graus impressed me deeply because in him I found the first teacher who knew how to examine the sources in novel ways.

I always set myself higher goals than I could achieve and so I sent two reports to the journal *Československý časopis historický* (Czechoslovak Historical Journal), which was led by František Graus as editor in chief. Before that, I had written him a rather provocative letter with criticism of the standard of the journal, especially its section of reviews and reports. My colleague Dušan Třeštík warned me that Graus would tell me where to get off. That did not happen. To my great surprise, Graus said I was right and asked me to write for the journal. I listened to him, began to contribute, and at the same time, with the help of his red pencils that corrected my texts, I started to learn how difficult a genre the essay was, let alone the review.

At that time, I followed continuously several dozen journals, not only domestic but also foreign, which kept arriving at Prague libraries from force of habit or in exchange. In the middle of the 1950s, the

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48 František Graus, *Dějiny venkovského lidu v Čechách v době předhusitské* [Rural people in Bohemia in the pre-Hussite period], 2 vols, *Studie a prameny: Sekce historická* 13 (Prague: Státní nakl. politické literatury, 1953–57).

situation of literature and editorial sources was not yet tragic. The library of the Historical Seminar of the Faculty of Arts was systematically enlarged until the beginning of World War II and again after the war until 1948. Even later, new publications from Western countries arrived occasionally. Otherwise, I could hardly have written a review of the second book by the then almost unknown French historian Jacques Le Goff,<sup>49</sup> *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, soon after its publication.

František Graus invited me when I was still a student to his first post-graduate seminar, where he admitted the graduates Vladimír Vavřínek,<sup>50</sup> Dušan Třeštík, and Miroslav Štěpánek.<sup>51</sup> Byzantine scholar Vavřínek knew Latin the best among us, Třeštík dazzled people with his insightful observations, and Štěpánek was well versed in historical archaeology, which then appeared on the scene. Our common topic was barbarian legal codes, one of the main sources for Graus's future book on the sovereigns and saints of the Merovingian Empire, which a great many historians specialized in the Early Middle Ages still consider a seminal work.<sup>52</sup> We reported on the assigned texts one at a time and had to swallow more than one of Graus's caustic comments. Yet, this was a school for which I was very grateful. Once, when I accompanied František Graus from the Prague Castle, where the Institute of History was headquartered, all the way to his residence in the street *Za Zelenou liškou*, I asked him why he had abandoned the High and Late Middle Ages. The answer was enlightening. Graus had wanted to study mainly the general history of the Middle Ages, but he could not study this in this country. The only exception was the period of the Frankish Empire, because the absolute majority of the sources had already been made available in critical editions by the publishers of the famous institution *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. Graus had almost all of the volumes from the Library of the Institute of History in his large office at the Prague Castle.

49 Le Goff, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge*, Temps qui court 3 (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1957).

50 Vladimír Vavřínek (b.1930), Czech historian.

51 Miroslav Štěpánek (1934–2005), Czech archaeologist and historian.

52 Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prague: ČSAV, 1965).

My friendship with František Graus was not particularly appreciated by my teacher Josef Polišenský, who differed greatly in his opinions from Graus. However, he kept this to himself and let me draft my master thesis on humanism in the period of King George of Poděbrady. Its motto was not very tactful towards my teacher: *Non nova, sed nove*.<sup>53</sup> I felt an inner need to make it clear, however, that I wanted to seek new paths, new questions, and methods of analysis, albeit only in a narrowly delineated and neglected area of cultural history.

In 1957, at the instigation of Professor Václav Husa, a prewar Marxist, I sent one of my preparatory studies on the history of early Bohemian Humanism to a competition announced in connection with the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. I heard that I had won the competition, but I was not selected for the delegation. It transpired later that this was a warning to me. However, since Václav Husa counted on me as his assistant, it had never occurred to me that I would become a revisionist all of a sudden. By 1959, it was still said that a revisionist is worse than an enemy.

**PR:** *How did you become a “revisionist,” as you call it ironically? What actually happened?*

**FŠ:** What happened? Some party members simply did not like the fact that Polišenský had suspiciously frequent contacts with foreign places, that he had even studied in England and elsewhere before February 1948, and that he attracted students with a serious interest in history. Well, he faced a disciplinary action. Although I was no longer one of his *intimissimi*, my name appeared in a resolution on his bad ideological influence on students. The content of the article “The Study of History in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France,” which I wrote together with him, was seen to be inappropriate if not outright revisionist. Professor Husa, whose assistant I was to become in the Department of Czechoslovak History, indicated to me that he would not have a place for me and that I should pay more attention to whom I had rela-

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<sup>53</sup> The thesis came out under the title *Humanismus v době poděbradské* [Humanism in the Poděbrady era], *Rozpravy ČSAV, řada společenských věd* 73/6 (Prague: ČSAV, 1963).

tions with. I found myself in an unenviable situation, because with my personnel profile, as it was called in the period political jargon, I could not find another suitable job in Prague. Likewise, I was also denied the usual deferral of military service, which under normal circumstances would have led to its shortening as a result of my advanced age. The whole affair also affected my personal life. My girlfriend Naďa was two years younger but in the same semester at the university. Her study results were excellent, so after finishing her studies she was to become an assistant in the Department of Czech Literature. And because she was from Rumburk, she also lived in the dormitory. Finding a flat in Prague was almost impossible without a party membership card or a command from “above.” When I managed to find a basement room with the help of my Prague cousin, it transpired that there would not be a place for me in the faculty after I finished my studies.

I could later have searched, after the revolution of 1989, whether any documents had been preserved on the whole affair, but I did not. Nor was I interested in the dossiers that the secret police kept on me, because I did not want to wallow in the mud. After all, my friends who did so and went to Pardubice, where the secret police dossiers were temporarily deposited, were disgusted and warned me against taking a similar step. I only intuited from various indications that the faculty communists had let me down and that even people from whom I would not have expected it spat on me.

When Naďa and I married in July 1958, we did not know that our first child was already on the way. All my efforts were focused on my wife being able to finish her studies. We managed this: at the end of December we had a daughter, Yvette, and Naďa remained with her at her parents’ in Rumburk. It was up to me to get jobs for both of us and a flat somewhere outside of Prague immediately after graduation.

**PR:** *What did you do?*

**FŠ:** I began my enquiries in the regional education department in Hradec Králové, and as I was not successful, I made a similar attempt the next day at the regional office in Ústí nad Labem. There was not a vacant flat available there either, but they advised me to ask in Litvínov.

During the journey from Most to the nearby district town of Litvínov I was shocked by the devastated landscape, which I saw from the tram connecting the cities of Most and Litvínov. The town itself with the scenery of the Ore Mountains (*Krušné hory*) in the background impressed me more favorably. What I did not expect also happened here. I had the keys to the flat in my hand and along with them two official job assignments.<sup>54</sup> One was for Naďa at the local grammar school,<sup>55</sup> the other for me at the lower level of the primary nine-year school.

We quickly moved in. The savings were soon used up and for quite a long time we lived from hand to mouth. In the street we aroused interest as the only household without a television, but we were happy in our flat, although this was only temporary, because almost two years of military service awaited me. The call-up order was to report to Vimperk in the Šumava Mountains, a garrison town on the western border of the “camp of peace and socialism,” as one of the period phrases had it.

The majority of young men in the 1950s did their compulsory military service, so my own experiences are quite typical. The recruits were subject to demeaning hazing for several months every year, generally tolerated by the officers. The training was hard, but not very effective; sloppiness was visible at every step; the food was on the whole acceptable, except the coffee with bromine, which was to suppress the sex drive. Night departures with the cannons and several winter stays in the mountainous areas were just as abhorrent as the occasional morning peeling of huge quantities of potatoes for the entire garrison.

I was somewhat surprised that as a university graduate I was not sent to a school for non-commissioned officers. I wanted to get at least on a training course for military drivers, which included practical know-how for repairs of trucks and other vehicles. I also failed in that. And because I had my papers checked and was watched every moment, I asked an acquaintance, who was a clerical worker in the regimental counterintelligence, to look into the dossier with my personal vetting data. What he found took my breath away. Among the files with my name, there were materials of a certain Šmehýl or Šmehl,

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54 A work assignment was an official order, which in the 1940s and 1960s determined for graduates their place of work and the type of work to be done for a period of five years.

55 Then eleven-year secondary school, from 1960 secondary general education school.

whose father-in-law had allegedly served in the Wehrmacht. My acquaintance advised me to ask about the reasons for the official harassment during the roll call. It was a ritual in which the entire regiment stood in line and the officers had to advance, first, a set distance and then, behind them, the non-commissioned officers and officer cadets. Only the privates and lance corporals remained on the baseline to be able to pass their complaints or requests to the military commissars without the knowledge of their commanders. I lodged my complaint, and after some time I found out from the clerical worker that the contents of the files had been changed.

Not even after this did I feel any relief. However, the officers sometimes honored me with a request to babysit for them in the evening. Doing this, I always ate well in their apartments and could watch television. I also led for them the political training of the rank and file, during which I taught half-literate Roma gypsies and easterners from Slovakia the rudiments of history and geography.<sup>56</sup> When they fell asleep during a lesson, I let them be.

I most suffered from a complete absence of privacy. In the barracks it was practically impossible to find a corner where I could find refuge with a book. The relatively long list of my works published in 1960–61 does not confirm this, strangely enough. Although I had finished the bulk of the studies before I entered military service, I am still amazed that I was able to review so many scholarly works. In my memories I only see bespattered, wax-cloth covered tables in the cafeteria on which I did the proofreading. I later found out that I had left plenty of mistakes in them. I am not surprised.

While it was not possible to cultivate the spirit, I at least exercised the body during my military service. In my youth, I was a rather good player of table tennis. That came in handy in the regimental tournament, in which I only lost in the final. The tournament was attended by players of a second-league handball team, which served as the reserve of the first-league team Dukla Prague. I was noticed by their trainer, and because he was looking for an alternate goalkeeper, he invited me to a

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<sup>56</sup> The Ukrainians from East Slovakia were called so for their language was difficult to understand.

tryout at a training session. With the pipedream of an easy military service, I withstood the torrent of hard hits and earned a place on the military semi-professional club. The trainer and some players were university graduates and were knowledgeable about the world of sport. Their desire was to spend as little time as possible in the barracks. Out of season, we constantly went to training facilities and tournaments. We participated in the training of the Prague athletic club Dukla, which had multiple world champions and competed in many sports. My small son later used to play with several medals from the army championships. They were somehow lost, so I cannot convince the unbelievers.

Otherwise, I was merely an alternate goalkeeper appearing at moments when there was nothing left to lose. Only once, in Písek, I gave a quite exceptional performance. After the match, the local officials got in touch with me and offered me a flat and a job if I would join their club after my military service. I refused this with thanks, as I had my home in Litvínov. My home, however, became more distant to me with the growing international tension resulting from the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was said that our year of service would be prolonged by a few months. This did happen, but university graduates were luckily released by the set autumn date. Thus ended my second hard trial after the Ostrava mines.

**PR:** *I suppose you returned to teach at the primary school in Litvínov.*

**FŠ:** It was supposed to be that way, but shortly before my return to civilian life I had received an offer from the district council for a vacant post of director of the Municipal Museum in Litvínov. I accepted the offer and joined the museum. Its director, Josef Dražný,<sup>57</sup> who devoted all his time to the museum, remained there on a part-time basis even after retiring, along with his wife. He was an old resident who knew the region better than anyone and also knew the local dialect. Finding that his original job was an express train driver aroused my interest and respect. With his encyclopedic knowledge, skills, and comportment, he was one of the former aristocrats among the manual laborers’

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<sup>57</sup> Josef Dražný (1907–87).



ranks, which had included train engineers along with tram drivers and other workers with the right to a pension. In the museum, I had to start from scratch. Life in the museum was made easier by another employee—a stage actor, reciter, and poet all in one—who had had to leave his teaching post because of his homosexual orientation. In contrast to the school authorities, the inspectors in the Department of Culture and Monument Preservation tried to keep this broadly talented person, Mirek Kovářík,<sup>58</sup> in the district. I accommodated them, employed Mirek, and enriched myself, *inter alia*, by a cursory look into the life of an oppressed minority.

My primary task was to create a scenario for a new museum exposition in the restored rooms of the local chateau. The existing museum in the building of the old town hall had to serve the public until the opening of the chateau exposition. I was glad about that because I did not have to dispose of the existing installations of local landmarks, collections of natural products, old porcelain, and curiosities, including a two-headed calf kept in a huge bottle of alcohol. All of this created an almost surrealistic spectacle which was already a rarity by that time. By contrast, the new exposition could not be anything but a banal object lesson on the region and history of the labor movement in the spirit of the ruling ideology.

Litvínov was almost a suburb of Prague in the 1960s. Its estates, with small Finnish houses at the foothills of the Ore Mountains, were dominated by the so-called Collective House, an imposing building designed by the architects Václav Hlinský<sup>59</sup> and Evžen Linhart<sup>60</sup> to put to the test new possibilities in housing, in the spirit of Le Corbusier.<sup>61</sup> In the local chemical works, hundreds of chemists and university graduates worked, making the city a hive of activity. The local ice hockey club was one of the best in the country, and competitive gymnasts did not lag behind. Also, Litvínov saw one of the first theatres of the so-called “small forms”: A Rather Small Theater, associated with the person of Mirek Kovářík. The secondary school where my wife taught had

58 Mirek Kovářík (b.1934), Czech writer, actor, teacher.

59 Václav Hlinský (1909–2001), Czech architect.

60 Evžen Linhart (1898–1949), Czech architect.

61 Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887–1965), Swiss-French architect.

a decent teaching staff. One could feel in the air a partial release from the simplistic ideological armor. Attempts at changes were manifested in the municipal council. The younger people in its leadership entertained hope for changes for the better. And it was they who offered me admission to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which in itself and by itself was a sign of the changing times.

After a long hesitation I agreed, although the fates of my family members should have been a warning. I had in my memory the short visit to my uncle in a uranium mining camp for political prisoners, in Bytíz near Příbram, which my mother and I had made with permission from the relevant authority. Experiences of this type battled with my deeply rooted social consciousness. Reluctantly, I had to admit that the working classes in towns had begun to do better. Besides, I did not plan to remain outside of the manifest efforts for change, albeit in the narrow sector of history and monument care. Above all, I believed that no one would have a say about me without me. This was truly naïve: I made a huge mistake and, as was later shown, paid heavily for my brief membership in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

As a “party task,” I was to stand for a seat in the municipal council in a constituency with a large Roma population. It was characteristic that I was duly elected. I began my mandate by making a count of domestic animals in the constituency, during which I was bitten in the thigh by a huge Alsatian dog.

Regional history, which was essentially my job description in the museum, necessarily needed a platform—without a journal it remained mute. I found a helper with the same ideas in Jan Doležal, the archivist in Most, with whom I began to publish a yearbook entitled *Regionální studie Litvínovsko-Mostecko* (Regional Studies of the Litvínov-Most District). Among other things, I began to sound the alarm when destruction caused by unrestricted coal mining began to threaten the most prominent monument of its type, the Most Deanery Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. My article “Není na spadnutí jen Staré Město pražské” (Not only Prague’s Old Town is about to fall), which came out in 1964 in the April edition of the revue *Dějiny a současnost*, was one of the first pieces of information on this monument

for the wider cultural public. I then returned to the topic in several subsequent articles in regional periodicals. The church was saved at the end—it was moved 841 meters in a spectacular action broadcast on television. The old and beautiful city center of Most as well as many neighboring villages were nevertheless destroyed.

**PR:** *Did your articles for the journal *Dějiny a současnost* reestablish your connections with Prague and its intellectual world?*

**FŠ:** I began to contribute as early as 1960, at the time of my military service, to then newly founded periodical *Dějiny a současnost*. I was asked to collaborate by its editor, Zdeněk Šikl,<sup>62</sup> who knew me from the faculty and who turned the journal into one of the most influential platforms of the Prague Spring. I wrote for the journal regularly.

The second, no less important connection with Prague for me was the Institute for the History of Charles University, headed by Professor František Kavka.<sup>63</sup> I had not been one of the students of this cultivated historian and lover of classical music, but despite that he invited me to participate in a planned collective monograph on the history of Charles University. This was most likely due to the fact that I had published a study in the first volume of the newly founded journal *Historia Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis*, “The Beginnings of Humanism at the University of Prague in the Poděbrady Era.”<sup>64</sup>

It was unexpected help in a time of dire need, because it allowed me to travel to Prague once a week for the meetings of the editorial board. The remaining time I used for study and borrowing otherwise inaccessible literature. What I particularly appreciated were meetings in the Karolinum, where the institute and the archives of Charles University were headquartered. There I first listened to and later also joined in the debates of leading experts on university history, such as Karel Kučera,<sup>65</sup>

62 Zdeněk Šikl (b.1933).

63 František Kavka (1920–2005), Czech historian.

64 František Šmahel, “Počátky humanismu na pražské universitě v době poděbradské,” [The beginnings of humanism at the Prague university at the time of the Poděbrads] *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Historia Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis* 1 (1960): 55–90.

65 Karel Kučera (1932–90), Czech historian.

Miroslav Truc,<sup>66</sup> and Jan Havránek.<sup>67</sup> Professor Kavka was an excellent stylist and experienced author of synthetic histories, so we accomplished the joint task with an encouraging result, which perhaps is also true of my chapter on the Hussite university.<sup>68</sup>

In 1963, my first published book came out after a long wait. It was an adaptation of the text of my master thesis, “Humanism in the Poděbrady Era,” which I had sent to the editorial board of *Rozpravy Československé akademie věd* (Discourses of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) on the invitation of Associate Professor Fiala, and with his recommendation, just before starting my military service. The new Academy had taken over this editorial series from its predecessor, the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, founded by the patron Josef Hlávka<sup>69</sup> in 1891. Following the old custom—soon to die out—the relevant section of the academy organized a discussion about whether the publication was worthwhile. In the case of my book, this did not take place because of my military service until October 26, 1961. Based on the recommendations from Urbánek and Kavka, and after a quite long discussion by the academicians and corresponding members, my work was accepted for publication. It actually came out after another two years.

Although I had published more than could have been expected in my situation, it was a surprise for me when I received an offer, at the end of 1963, from the director of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences’ Institute of History to enter an open competition for the position of historian of early Bohemian history.<sup>70</sup>

**PR:** *And this was the beginning of your engagement with the Hussite studies?*

**FŠ:** During the admission interview, Academician Macek told me quite frankly that he wanted to study the Italian Renaissance in the

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66 Miroslav Truc (1929–96), Czech historian.

67 Jan Havránek (1928–2003), Czech historian.

68 *Dějiny Univerzity karlovy I, 1347/48–1622*, ed. František Kavka and Josef Petrů (Prague: Karolinum, 1995).

69 Josef Hlávka (1831–1908), Czech architect and philanthropist.

70 Until 1952 State Institute of History (founded in 1921).

near future and that he counted on me for research on Hussitism. I had anticipated this; shortly before then, he had published two studies on the Roman tribune Cola di Rienzo and his relations with Petrarch. I agreed to the exchange of topics without batting an eyelid, as I had no choice anyway. On the other hand, I was assigned as a research task the fifteenth century, in which the Czech Lands made a deep mark on the general history of Europe.

At that time, *Hussite Ideology* by Robert Kalivoda<sup>71</sup> was just released. The challenging book dazzled me with its complicated philosophical-historical construction, but it did not blind me. Its merit was that, like a woodworm, it undid the previous Marxist construction of direct connections between the so-called base and the superstructure; that is, between material existence, on the one hand, and the spirituality, thought, and ideology of Bohemian medieval society from the beginning of the fifteenth century, on the other hand. Kalivoda recognized astutely that the revolutionary process in Hussite Bohemia did not end with the defeat of the Tábor-based radicals, as thought by Macek, and that its long-term consequences continued well into the sixteenth century, if not all the way to 1620. However, the supposed early bourgeois nature and transformation of this long-term process were justified by Kalivoda so speculatively that his conception hangs to this day over Bohemian history like a metahistorical haze.

**PR:** *What do you mean by “metahistorical haze”? How did Macek’s and Kalivoda’s conceptions influence you personally in your early considerations of Hussitism and, more broadly, in the evaluation of the Bohemian and European society of the Late Middle Ages?*

**FS:** Josef Macek was a raconteur with an emotionally direct attitude to Hussitism, which he fitted into the adopted Marxist templates of history as a process of class warfare. He wrote his large monograph on Tábor quickly and at an early age. It represented only a Marxist reinterpretation of the seminal monograph of Josef Pekař on the military

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Kalivoda (1923–89), Czech philosopher. Robert Kalivoda, *Husitská ideologie* [Hussite ideology] (Prague: NČSAV, 1964).

leader Jan Žižka and Hussitism's destructive radicalism from the 1930s.<sup>72</sup> Pekař as well as Macek finished the narrative at moments immediately following the revolutionary Thermidor.<sup>73</sup> Pekař ends his book with the death of the undefeated Hussite commander in 1424 and Macek with the crushing of the Táborite free-thinkers two years earlier.

Robert Kalivoda was a philosopher who saw history from a dispassionate point of view and possessed the rare ability to approach a longer historical period conceptually. He tried to form a developmental arch from the beginnings of the Bohemian Reformation until the defeat of the Bohemian Protestant estates in 1620.

Whereas Kalivoda gave prominence to the dynamics of the revolutionary process, another important thinker dealing with Hussitism, the theologian Amedeo Molnár, understood the same "long" period as a component of the European Reformation process. This was only wishful thinking, which did not worry them as they were not historians. Both knew how to present their concepts vividly, here and there blurred by a philosophical or theological haze of a level that was somehow higher and inaccessible to others. Thus, many people were willing to accept their ideas.

Why did I lump together such different personalities as the Marxist philosopher Kalivoda and the Protestant theologian Amedeo Molnár? I realized it later when I read the considerations of Milan Kundera on the novels of Anatole France and Curzio Malaparte.<sup>74</sup> Both Kalivoda and Molnár, in a corner of their minds, wanted something that did not exist in reality. Molnár would have liked to extend the existence of the Waldensians, and therefore exaggerated the historical importance of the Waldensian internationals in the Hussite period.<sup>75</sup> Kalivoda's

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72 Josef Pekař (1870–1937), Czech historian, published four volumes of his monograph *Jan Žižka a jeho doba* [Jan Žižka and his time] (Prague: Vesmír, 1927–33).

73 In this case it means the defeat and annihilation of the radical Táborite wing in 1421.

74 They are texts published in a collection of Milan Kundera (b.1929), *Une rencontre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) and partially translated into Czech under the title *Zabradou těch, které mám rád* [Through a garden of those I love] (Brno: Atlantis, 2014).

75 The concept of the Waldensian-Hussite internationals was developed by Molnár in his book *Valdenští: Evropský rozměr jejich vzdoru* [Waldensians: The European dimension of their resistance] (Prague: Kalich, 1991); French version: Jean Gonnet and Amedeo Molnár, *Les Vaudois au Moyen Âge* (Torino: Claudiana, 1974).

ideal and his idealistic scheme of the victorious Bohemian revolution were ruined by the annihilation of the Táborite radicals, and then again by the Soviet tanks in August 1968. When the hopes for a quick reversal in the foreseeable future had been dashed, Kalivoda allowed the revolution to win on domestic soil, at least in the past. He extended the Bohemian Reformation's existence to 1620, when it was definitively defeated on the battlefield of White Mountain by the Habsburg forces of the Counter-Reformation.

**PR:** *Does this mean that the Marxist conception of history influenced you significantly then?*

**FŠ:** When looking back at one's own past, it is sometimes necessary to have the courage to decipher openly the genetic codes of intellectual youth and maturation. I admit that I find myself here on a not very solid ground of introspection. A historian often does not know what is guiding his pen. Let it be said that it took me quite a long time to free myself from the yoke of neo-Marxism. My fates luckily imposed on me doubt and a knack for turning things inside out.

**PR:** *Let us return to your admission to the Institute of History.*

**FŠ:** The Institute of History had its headquarters in the rather dilapidated Lobkowitz Palace in the lower part of Jiřská Street at the Prague Castle. After a longer period, I was one of the few who was admitted to this academic institution. At first, I was assigned a place in an office of the department of modern history, but I was soon given an office with a beautiful view of Prague, where for years the publishers of medieval sources and excellent Latin scholars Jaroslav Eršil<sup>76</sup> and Jiří Spěváček<sup>77</sup> had their desks. Although they were about ten years older, they received me warmly. I soon felt a permanent tension between them and the directors of the institute. This was not surprising; both colleagues felt like hacks whose lot it was to prepare editions of sourc-

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<sup>76</sup> Jaroslav Eršil (1926–2009), Czech historian.

<sup>77</sup> Jiří Spěváček (1923–96), Czech historian.

es, a work which required high scholarly qualities but was grossly undervalued in comparison with the great historical narratives Graus and Macek produced.

In the department of earlier Czechoslovak history, which was led by Josef Kočí<sup>78</sup> and to which I was assigned, I met colleagues whose books and studies I knew well. The elegant Moravian Josef Janáček<sup>79</sup> came to the institute from the Prague City Archive as a recognized expert on the history of Bohemian cities of the sixteenth century. He first looked down on me, perhaps seeing me as the director's protégé. We later became so close that he explained to me the cause of his career handicap, at least the way he saw it: during his studies at the faculty, Professor Otakar Odložilík<sup>80</sup> wanted to have Janáček as his assistant, but he indicated that Janáček's membership in the Communist Party bothered him. That was why sometime in the autumn of 1947 Janáček decided to leave the party. He said that when he placed his membership card on the president's cathedra at the plenary session, he felt the hateful looks of his former fellow party members on his back as he left the hall. By coincidence, the second senior colleague, historian of agrarian history Alois Míka,<sup>81</sup> was also branded as being unreliable. As a student before February 1948 he had imprudently left the Communist Party, for which he made up by rejoining under the adopted name of his wife.

Thus, the Institute of History was not the vetting monolith that it might have appeared to be from the outside. Already in 1956, two independents were admitted to the Brno branch on postgraduate scholarships. Jaroslav Marek<sup>82</sup> caught my attention with his self-effacing deportment and impressive erudition in the area of philosophical and sociological literature. I had lacunae in both of these spheres. Marek was more interested in thinking about history than in history proper. This was also visible in his dissertation on the social structure of the Moravian royal towns of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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78 Josef Kočí (1922–86), Czech historian.

79 Josef Janáček (1925–94), Czech historian.

80 Otakar Odložilík (1899–1973), Czech historian and archivist.

81 Alois Míka (1928–91), Czech historian.

82 Jaroslav Marek (1926–2011), historian.



The history of towns came to the fore at the institute at that time, because a second Brno postgraduate student, Jaroslav Mezník,<sup>83</sup> also studied it. He took the assigned research of the medieval patrician class as a stimulating topic, in comparison with the administrative and cataloguing work in the archives in which he had been employed before. He came from the wealthy family of a Moravian-Silesian provincial president, who paid with his life for his bravery in the time of the German occupation. This did not protect Mezník in any way from troubles of a personnel nature, when a few years later the party leadership realized that his class origin had not been taken into account in his admittance as a postgraduate fellow.<sup>84</sup>

In terms of work, I was closer to Mezník, with whom I gradually made friends. With Marek, I had relations of collegial respect, which only shifted to the realm of friendship at the beginning of the 1990s. I will return to both of them, as well as to Bedřich Loewenstein,<sup>85</sup> who studied the history of German liberalism and democratization in the nineteenth century in Graus's Department of General History. Loewenstein also got into the Institute of History by a small miracle, because he had been expelled from the Faculty of Arts for political reasons in 1951. Two years later, he was allowed to continue his studies and was admitted to postgraduate study immediately after graduation. I met him on the editorial board of *Dějiny a současnost*, and from that time we were close.

It was no accident that the three colleagues joined the Institute of History in 1956, during a short political thaw before the Hungarian Uprising. After that, the regime again became stricter, and this was palpable at the institute.

**PR:** *I assume that you initially commuted to Prague from Litvínov.*

83 Jaroslav Mezník (1928–2008), Czech historian.

84 For more details, see Jaroslav Mezník, *Můj život za vlády komunistů: (1948–1989)* [My life during the reign of the communists: (1948–1989)], *Prameny dějin moravských 10* (Brno: Matice moravská, 2005), 118 and 123. The most detailed description of the atmosphere at the Institute of History from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1970s so far can be found in this book.

85 Bedřich Loewenstein (b.1929), Czech-German historian.

**FS:** Yes, there was a permanent housing shortage. We were in a housing cooperative, but it was common that one had to wait several years for the allocation of a flat. The advantage was that, considering the housing situation, I was allowed to commute to the institute only once a week. Over the next few years, I did not change my life rhythm much. When my mother-in-law visited us in Litvínov, my wife and I could treat ourselves to a visit to the Semafor Theater or an important concert in Prague. In March 1965, we were at a concert of Louis Armstrong in the Lucerna Palace, which we had to leave early to catch the last bus for Litvínov. Travelling by bus then was quite adventurous. In the autumnal fog it sometimes happened that I had to walk in front of the bus for the driver to continue driving at all. In those years, I could always be seen with a large briefcase, in which I carried books, journals, and black-and-white prints of pages on photographic paper.

**PR:** *What were your first tasks at the institute?*

**FS:** By chance, one month after my joining the institute, the jubilee year of the five hundredth anniversary of the Peace Treaty of King George of Poděbrady began, which fit well into the Soviet bloc's arsenal of peace initiatives. Professor Václav Vaněček,<sup>86</sup> who perceived the jubilee as a scholarly challenge to Czech legal history, did not let the occasion go by. His secretary was Jiří Kejř,<sup>87</sup> who welcomed my nomination to the sub-commission for the organization of the symposium and associated exhibition at the chateau of Poděbrady. The work benefited me professionally: I learned how to write concepts for historical exhibitions, I presented a paper for the first time at an international conference, and I got to know personally several foreign historians, in particular F. G. Heymann,<sup>88</sup> Eduard Winter,<sup>89</sup> Victor L. Tapié,<sup>90</sup> Tibor Kardos,<sup>91</sup> and Ferdinand Seibt.<sup>92</sup> My ability in organizing the

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86 Václav Vaněček (1905–85), Czech jurist and legal historian.

87 Jiří Kejř (1921–2015), Czech legal historian, specializing in the Middle Ages.

88 F. G. Heymann (1900–83), German-American historian.

89 Eduard Winter (1896–1982), Austrian historian.

90 Victor L. Tapié (1900–74), French historian.

91 Tibor Kardos (1908–73), Hungarian historian.

92 Ferdinand Seibt (1927–2003), German historian.

events for this jubilee was rewarded, and I became the institute's secretary to international conferences, standing in for both medievalists, Josef Macek and František Graus, at those activities in which they did not want to participate or could not attend for various reasons.

In 1964, I had received the assignment to organize an international conference on the 550th anniversary of the death of the reformer Jan Hus, which was to take place in August 1965. The title *Symposium husianum Pragense*, which I submitted for approval, was so appealing to the leadership of the institute that it was used for three other institutional conferences. I had less success with the written justification of the symposium for the relevant department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In it, I emphasized not only the importance of Hus's personality but also the need for international scientific cooperation. Graus called me, marveled at my naïveté, and wrote the necessary political justification in the request himself.

**PR:** *Which guests did you invite to the symposium?*

**FŠ:** I could not influence the selection of the foreign guests much because Macek and Graus followed their own intentions. The name of each historian from the capitalist world had to be approved by the relevant powers. The "thaw," however, had already started to be felt, so the invitations were received also by experts who otherwise would not have gotten to Prague. They included the famous scholar of Slavic and Byzantine studies Francis Dvorník.<sup>93</sup> As a priest and theologian, Dvorník laughed heartily when he received an invitation from me to a reception that was addressed also to his wife. "We haven't gone that far in the Church yet," he added. The guests included another two priests, canon Étienne Delaruelle<sup>94</sup> and the Belgian Benedictine Paul De Vooght,<sup>95</sup> both acknowledged experts on medieval Church history. The latter was preceded by his reputation as a Catholic nonconformist, who did not hesitate to write that Hus had been a better Christian than his judges at Constance. This stance did not appeal either to the

93 Francis Dvorník (1893–1975), Czech theologian and historian.

94 Étienne Delaruelle (1904–71), French theologian and historian.

95 Paul De Vooght (1900–83), Belgian theologian and historian.

Czech Catholics or to the Protestant expert on the Hussite movement, F. M. Bartoš, who entered into bitter polemics with De Vooght.

Today, hardly anyone can imagine what a chink the *Symposium Hussianum* made in the Iron Curtain, which also walled in Czech medieval studies. At the conference, all of the participants spoke without inhibition, the discussions were to the point, and the contacts that were established were mostly lasting. The keynote speakers on the Czech side were Josef Macek, Amedeo Molnár, Robert Kalivoda, and the linguist Bohumil Havránek.<sup>96</sup> My paper was devoted to Master Jerome of Prague, who was burned at the stake in Constance a year after Hus.

**PR:** *What was your research like when you were so busy with the preparations?*

**FŠ:** I have already quoted my guiding principle *non nova, sed nove*. I soon determined empirically that new methodological stimuli come from working with the sources, especially if the researcher is perceptive to contemporary theoretical impulses. In the study of a great amount of serial and other sources, it is necessary to accept the risk of losing time along the way. I learned this while doing research on the life and works of Jerome of Prague; I came to the issue of determining his contribution to the changes in the University of Prague's legislation in January 1409, the so-called Decree of Kutná Hora, which led to the secession of the majority of foreign masters and students. Czech historiography then proceeded from the concept that the members of the domestic corporation, the Bohemian university "nation," already had a significant majority at the university, and so the change in the ratio of votes in their favor was justifiable (following the corporate formula, the top positions at the university and the colleges were filled and each of the four nations had one vote). Inspired by a treatise on broaching inversed questions by the founder of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener,<sup>97</sup> I tried to look at the issue from the other side: Is what looks like reality

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<sup>96</sup> Bohumil Havránek (1893–1978), Czech linguist.

<sup>97</sup> Norbert Wiener (1894–1964), US-American Mathematician.

actually real? What if the Bohemian university corporation did not have a majority? None of the Czech historians considered research in this regard necessary, because the hypothesis of the predominance of members of the Bohemian university nation fit precisely with the overall image of the university dispute, which resulted in the promulgation of the Decree of Kutná Hora.

This statistical-sociological research with elements of later prosopography<sup>98</sup> took me six months. Throughout this time I had no idea whether the result would not be just a confirmation of the generally known opinion. The data that I discovered, however, cast doubt on the existing interpretations. The masters of the Bohemian nation had a roughly one-third representation on the professorial staff, but the number of students of this corporation had decreased, so that by 1409 they were not even one-fifth of the total number. The efforts of the Bohemian masters for a change in the university votes did not stem so much from a desire for a more equitable control of the university situation as from fear of the future preservation of their existing positions. The statistical calculations of the university frequency allowed me to outline a sociological analysis of the Prague students. My work was gradually followed by the research of František Kavka<sup>99</sup> and Hana Václavů,<sup>100</sup> and the theses of a team working under the guidance of Michal Svatoš,<sup>101</sup> which conducted similar research on the matriculated students of Prague's university of law. Nowadays, it is an inter-linked and verified body of information, which can be expanded by further probes.

I handed in a monograph entitled *Prague's University Students in the Pre-Revolutionary Period 1399–1419*<sup>102</sup> to the journal *Rozpravy ČSAV* (Discussions of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) on the last day of February 1966.

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98 Prosopography deals with the systematic research on a certain circle of people, with regard to their origins, careers, or kinship relations.

99 František Kavka (1920–2005), Czech historian.

100 Hana Václavů (b.1947).

101 Michal Svatoš (b.1947), Czech historian.

102 František Šmahel, *Pražské univerzitní studentstvo v předrevolučním období: 1399–1419* [Prague university students in the pre-revolutionary period: 1399–1419] (Prague: ČSAV, 1967).

**PR:** *The 1960s are currently seen as an eminently heroic time, which redefined the starting points of research in the social sciences and humanities and laid the bases for the theoretical and methodological approaches upon which we build today.*

**FŠ:** I reminded my students more than once, when I became a university professor after 1989, that at the outset of research they cannot know where the chosen method will lead them, because if it were known, the basic questions would not have to be asked. The initial model scheme—if the state of the research allows it to be created at all—must therefore be constantly verified. I spent a year digging tunnels in the mine in Ostrava, so I compare historical research to looking for veins of gold. If I dig a tunnel according to plan, I will reach the end, but what I am seeking will not necessarily appear. Therefore it is necessary to dig, metaphorically speaking, experimental side corridors, with the risk of losing time, because precisely in them we can expect the discovery of a gold-bearing vein.

**PR:** *At the time when you worked on the ground-breaking studies on the University of Prague, you also participated in a great many other projects.*

**FŠ:** Yes. Historians are not always granted a chance to seek the new in new ways. In my position I carried out tasks for the benefit of the community. One of them was indisputably to produce study aids and bibliographies. When I received a call from the Parisian center to join in the newly established International Bibliography of Humanism and the Renaissance, I requested consent from the institute. In cooperation with Josef Hejnic<sup>103</sup> and Anděla Fialová<sup>104</sup> from the Institute for Classical Studies, I contributed to this useful bibliographic yearbook every year for almost twenty years.

Much of my time was also taken up by a historical course book for training the instructors of workers' ideological education. My task was to rewrite the book and supplement it according to a prescribed outline,

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<sup>103</sup> Josef Hejnic (b.1924), Czech philologist.

<sup>104</sup> Anděla Fialová (1917–81), Czech philologist.

which I had deliberately changed. When a request for such a course book came from revolutionary Cuba, the book I had reworked was translated into Spanish. The Cuban edition came out in 1966 and then perhaps also in other countries of South America. I played a part in the book only as an editor, but I was well paid for the work, which I welcomed, because my wife was at home on maternity leave. The 550th anniversary of the death of Jerome of Prague at the Council of Constance quickly approached, and I began to devote myself primarily to the preparations for the jubilee. The director of the institute, Macek, put the emphasis on popularization; he himself set the example in this regard and called on others to follow. As a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, he was then at the peak of his political power. The editorial series *Odkazy pokrokových osobností minulosti* (Legacies of Progressive Personalities of Our Past), which he ran and was published by the press *Svobodné slovo* (Free Word),<sup>105</sup> was also very important to him. I could not and did not want to refuse the request to quickly prepare Jerome's biography<sup>106</sup> for this editorial series, since Jerome was a personality uncommonly dear to me. My problem was that I had not gotten very far in my research on this important personality of the Bohemian Reformation movement, and in the book I could only outline my approach and general conception.

In 1965, I succeeded in a competition of the Austrian Ministry of Education: from the middle of September until the middle of October I could study in the Austrian National Library, where I managed to examine some manuscripts with treatises by Jerome of Prague and carry on my research on him. In the university archive I was interested in the second volume of the acts of the rectorate and the official books of the deans of the faculties of arts and theology, which had not yet been published. And I found in them traces of Jerome and his heresy trial in Vienna. In the years just before 1968 it was possible to travel abroad again. In November 1966, I was a guest of the Polish Academy of Sci-

<sup>105</sup> It was typical of the contemporary situation that *Svobodné slovo* belonged to the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, which, as a component of the political grouping of the National Front, was entirely subordinate to the ruling Communist Party.

<sup>106</sup> František Šmahel, *Jeronym Pražský: Život revolučního intelektuála* (Jerome of Prague: The Life of a Revolutionary Intellectual) (Prague: Svobodné slovo, 1966).

ences (PAN) as part of a research fellowship. For me and a number of my friends, Poland was a promised land with lively cultural activity and an offer of book titles inaccessible in Bohemia. In this way, I acquired, *inter alia*, the Polish edition of Le Goff's *La civilisation de l'Occident medieval*.<sup>107</sup> I went to the Polish Cultural Center in Prague every week because the books in demand came only in a few copies.

The door opened also to the West. More frequent foreign journeys led to new personal contacts, thanks to which the availability of scholarships increased for younger researchers. In this regard, the friendship that Josef Macek established with Robert Mandrou,<sup>108</sup> a professor at the Paris l'École pratique des hautes études and secretary to the editorial board of the famous revue *Annales ESC*, was immensely beneficial. At Macek's recommendation, Mandrou obtained for me an invitation for a month-long stay, which I fully utilized to study in the Bibliothèque nationale in November 1967. I was very pleased with an invitation from Jacques Le Goff, who remembered his research fellowship in Prague. I also met with Paul De Vooght, who came to see me in Paris from his abbey in Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

**PR:** *The Prague Spring was already on the way.*

**FŠ:** My journey to Paris at the end of October 1967 was preceded by the second *Symposium Pragense*, which was devoted to ties between the Bohemian Reformation and the reformations of the sixteenth century. The participation of foreign guests surpassed all expectations. Prague began to attract particularly those historians who welcomed the possibility of dialogue with Marxists on a professional level. It was characteristic that all of the Soviet historians had made excuses. On the contrary, specialists of a truly high repute came from the West: Professor Ernest Fraser Jacob,<sup>109</sup> Hermann Heimpel,<sup>110</sup> and Karl August Fink,<sup>111</sup> and among

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<sup>107</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Kultura średniowiecznej Europy* [Culture of Medieval Europe], trans. Hanna Szumańska-Grossowa (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1970).

<sup>108</sup> Robert Mandrou (1921–84), French historian.

<sup>109</sup> Ernest Fraser Jacob (1894–1971), British medievalist.

<sup>110</sup> Hermann Heimpel (1901–88). German medievalist.

<sup>111</sup> Karl August Fink (1904–83), German theologian and historian.



the younger ones, Bernard Töpfer.<sup>112</sup> A sign of the trust in the openness and freedom of speech was that E. Dellaruelle, F. G. Heymann, F. Seibt and P. De Vooght returned to Prague for a second symposium.

**PR:** *At that time, you still commuted from Litvínov to Prague with that work load?*

**FŠ:** We were to finally move houses after my return from Paris. My wife was not sure if she wanted to go to Prague. There was a promise of better times for us, but she did not feel like leaving the milieu of the grammar school in Litvínov, where she had acquired an impeccable reputation. It was not possible to find a corresponding position for her in Prague, so she found a job in a textile technical school. To her it was a whirl of domestic and other obligations, and I could not do much to help. From morning to evening, I was absorbed in the train of events which stirred the institute, Prague, and the entire country. I returned home tired, but I did not bring calm to the family, only news of the ground-breaking events. I was among the growing number of people who followed with hope the gradual relaxation of the communist regime's control, but I was always on guard. I discovered with amazement that control was taken mainly by those who had infused youthful radicalism into the victorious regime in February 1948 and the following years. They had mostly ended up on the lower levels of the power pyramid, but they now felt that their time had come. They again stepped forward, this time as revisionists of the process that they had helped to create. Some aspects of this phenomenon were captured by Milan Kundera in his generational novel *Žert* (*The Joke*).<sup>113</sup>

**PR:** *How did the revolutionary time of the Prague Spring manifest itself at the Institute of History?*

**FŠ:** In a certain sense, the institute had its own political climate. We resided in one of the heavily guarded buildings of Prague Castle, the

<sup>112</sup> Bernard Töpfer (1926–2012), German historian.

<sup>113</sup> Milan Kundera, *Žert* (*The Joke*), *Žatva* 325 (Prague: Československý Spisovatel, 1967).

seat of the president of the republic, Antonín Novotný,<sup>114</sup> with whom the director of our institute was in favor. The first postwar premier of the Czechoslovak government, Zdeněk Fierlinger,<sup>115</sup> became our well-paid colleague after leaving public life. He attended the plenary sessions of the institute, during which he usually slept quietly.

**PR:** *You said that you watched the gradual thaw with great caution. What was the reason for this?*

**FŠ:** I have to say that I never felt at ease among the chanting and manifestly proclaiming comrades, regardless if they were members of Communist Party or not. Once, still as a student, I found myself in the midst of a noisy crowd at a demonstration, where it was dangerous to be silent. I tried to join in, out of cowardice, but only a strange, weak voice came out of my mouth, so I preferred to keep silent. It does not, however, follow from this that I would not succumb to some excited moments, expectations, and hopes, and later disappointments, in 1968.

I was all of a sudden thrown into active politics, when I was nominated in the annual elections for chairman of the trade union branch (named Revolutionary Union Movement) at the institute. Until the spring of 1968 the union was an obedient instrument of party policy, but then it quickly became a potential base for the activity of people who were not members of the Communist Party. Union branches were everywhere: it was not necessary to create them; it was enough simply to change their committees. It was certainly no accident that the union became the driving force in the rehabilitation process at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, especially when the widely respected scientist Otto Wichterle<sup>116</sup> assumed its leadership. He was otherwise the president of the founding committee of the Union of Researchers.

I was duly elected as chairman. The party members considered me as one of their own, and for the rest I was one of the young scholars who had not and could not yet have dirtied their hands. It also helped that I had already put out several publications and that I had given a

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<sup>114</sup> Antonín Novotný (1904–75), president of Czechoslovakia (1957–68).

<sup>115</sup> Zdeněk Fierlinger (1891–1976), prime minister of Czechoslovakia (1944–46).

<sup>116</sup> Otto Wichterle (1913–98), Czech chemist.

good account of myself as secretary and organizer of the two major international conferences.

In August 1968, I was on holiday with my family in Rumburk, in close proximity to the borders with the German Democratic Republic. In the night between August 20 and 21, columns of East German motorized units drove through the town without us being aware of it. Shortly before seven in the morning, my mother-in-law woke me and said in an excited voice: “The Russkies have occupied us.” I ran to the radio, which confirmed the news. It was quite clear to me that this was the end of all the hopes which we pinned on the brief Prague Spring. Right after breakfast, I looked for a train or a bus connection to Prague. Both were suspended for a few days, so I was stuck with my family, far from the events shown on television screens around the world. I watched everything as involuntary spectator.

**PR:** *How did you reflect on these events back then—if you can separate your current reflections from the past ones, which is naturally immensely difficult.*

**FŠ:** In the first place, I asked myself why I had failed as a historian, when I allowed myself to be enticed by the arguments of my colleagues stressing the Kremlin would shrink from an occupation. The Hungarian example did not justify such hopes, but it had happened almost fifteen years earlier. All of the historians studying contemporary history—including the history of the communist and labor movements—of whom there were more than enough at the institute, claimed in unison that the Soviet leadership would not dare to invade. They said that our country bordered West Germany and Brezhnev<sup>117</sup> would have another world war on his hands. I remembered one American writer whose skeptical evaluation of the ability of historians to predict the correct course of events I had once read. He remembered a history lesson during which the professor explained to the students why the US would not enter the war, when the school PA system announced the attack of the Japanese on Pearl Harbor.

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<sup>117</sup> Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev (1906–82), Soviet politician who led the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982 as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Later, about twelve years after the Soviet occupation, I heard in a wine bar in Tábor the talk of a local party member whose predilection for history went so far that he politically advocated my employment at the local town museum. Over one of several brandies, he leaned towards me and said: "Nobody here gets uppity with me," because he was the only person who had welcomed the Russian-led occupation forces in Tábor. He knew what risk he was running, as almost everyone threatened him with the gallows. He waved his hand and added: "Why, it had to be clear to everyone who read the Yalta Agreement. The Russians could do anything in their zone knowing that the Americans would only protest at the most." He undoubtedly tried to rationalize his unprecedented public collaboration, but in a certain sense this unschooled politologist gave me a history lesson.

**PR:** *When did you get back to Prague? How did you perceive the post-occupation atmosphere in Prague?*

**FS:** After returning to the institute I could not believe my eyes. Cowards had become heroes, internationalists had become patriots, and procrastinators had become selfless helpers accumulating documentation for *Seven Days in Prague*, nicknamed later as the "Black Book,"<sup>118</sup> on which the employees of the institute were working feverishly. I wanted to help, but all of the tasks had already been allocated and nobody needed help. Again, like many times before, I felt superfluous. It was not my fault that I had not experienced the massive upsurge of national solidarity which united friends and enemies, people known and unknown, communists and their opponents, in the capital during the crucial days after the occupation armies have arrived.

I might have been deprived by my lack of experience of crowd emotions, but I felt them intensively, just like the painful humiliation of the nation in the subsequent period. I critically considered the explosive and fleeting nature of national sentiments in the book *The Idea of*

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<sup>118</sup> *Seven Days in Prague*, the so-called *Black Book*, is an authoritative Czechoslovak account of the Soviet invasion. The original Czech edition appeared in late 1968, circulating only in photo-off-set copies, a few of which reached the West. A slightly abridged version was published in an English translation: *The Czech Black Book*, ed. Robert Littell (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

*the Nation in Hussite Bohemia*, which I finished in 1969.<sup>119</sup> It did not escape my friend Alexander Stich,<sup>120</sup> who discovered through a semantic analysis of the book that in roughly eighty percent of the cases I had taken a negative or critical position on the idea of “nation.” This surprised even myself.

**PR:** *What do you think of the idea of the nation now? I mean, in general.*

**FŠ:** Belonging to a nation, to a specific culture, and to the faith of the fathers are given conditions in the cradle. What attitude an individual adopts towards them was not and still is not merely an individual choice. It is possible to do a lot of good for the idea of a nation, as for a faith, but also to kill and excommunicate. As a historian, I try to see things from a detached point of view and not to forget that the world does not comprise only my homeland and Western civilization. I fear to say more in brief now.

**PR:** *Let us stop and talk about the “Black Book.”*

**FŠ:** The “Black Book” was an uncommonly commendable documentation of seven days in Prague, the week of August 21 to 27, 1968.<sup>121</sup> The Institute of History, which had the task of presenting and supporting the Marxist interpretation of history, cleansed its past with the book, as it were. Few historical documents attracted such attention both worldwide and at home. The “Black Book,” which countered the “White Book” on the counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia,<sup>122</sup> triggered two

<sup>119</sup> František Šmahel, *Idea národa v husitských Čechách* [The idea of the nation in Hussite Bohemia] (České Budějovice: Růže, 1971).

<sup>120</sup> Alexander Stich (1934–2003), Czech linguist and literary scholar.

<sup>121</sup> The title of the book in the black cover, which came out in 3,000 copies, was *Sedm pražských dnů. 21.–27. srpna 1968: Dokumentace* [Seven days in Prague, August 21–27, 1968: Documentation] (Prague: Academia, 1990).

<sup>122</sup> The “White Book”: *K událostem v Československu: Fakta, dokumenty, svědectví tisku a očitých svědků* [On the events in Czechoslovakia: Facts, documents, witness of the press and eyewitnesses] (Moscow: Tisková Skupina Sovětských Žurnalistů, 1968), was compiled by the Press Group of Soviet Journalists on the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact on August 21, 1968. The “Black Book” nevertheless was not compiled as a reaction to the “White Book.” The connection was established only later.

cabinet meetings and a protest note from the Soviets. Political responsibility for its publication was born by Josef Macek as the director, even though he had nothing to do with it. Although it was a legal publication, in 1970–71 it became the subject of an in-depth investigation by the General Prosecutor's Office and the Investigations Department of State Security (Secret Police). The two editors, later leading representatives of the dissent, Milan Otáhal<sup>123</sup> and Vilém Prečan,<sup>124</sup> bravely shouldered all the responsibility. One of the consequences of the "Black Book" was the closure of the Institute of History.

**PR:** *Let us return to the events of 1968 again.*

**FŠ:** The real hero in the August parliament was Josef Macek, as he was responsible, together with General Bohumír Lomský,<sup>125</sup> for the readiness for action within the representative body of a state occupied by foreign armies. It was as if his entire previous involvement with the party had been forgotten. Anti-Soviet statements were now publicly signed by other party members, some of whom later recanted with due repentance.

One event after another unfolded so that it is not easy to keep the chronological order of memories of the autumnal months of 1968. Shortly after returning from the holiday, I discovered that a planned conference of English and Czech historians really would take place in London and Oxford in the first half of September. Above and beyond discussions of an organizational nature about the character of our future cooperation, which, considering the development of the situation, made no sense, lectures and discussions were on the program. I was given the task by the director of the institute to prepare a lecture on the reception of the teachings of John Wycliffe in Hussite Bohemia. The topic helped me not only to become the youngest member of the Czechoslovak delegation but also to gain a research fellowship at All Souls College. For a week, I could use a professor's suite with a valet, for whom I had no work. Other memorable experiences were the college dinners with many courses, which can perhaps only be seen in

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<sup>123</sup> Milan Otáhal (1928–2017), Czech historian.

<sup>124</sup> Vilém Prečan (b.1933), Czech historian.

<sup>125</sup> Bohumír Lomský (1914–82), Czech politician, minister of national defense (1956–68).

English detective stories. To see Oxford with my own eyes had been one of my life's dreams. Later, I could study and advance my knowledge there at various colleges. In September 1968, we saw in England an enormous and genuine interest in the events in our country.

The "Black Book" was not the only historical publication that tried in 1968 to change the set direction of Czech historiography. At the end of March 1967, František Graus wrote an essay entitled "Our Living and Dead Past."<sup>126</sup> In it he suggested with admirable erudition and from a broad perspective, *inter alia*, that the sterile concentration on national history prevents one from viewing Czech history in the European and global context. It was an appeal, not categorical hectoring, which Graus had been famous for earlier. His essay became the basis of a joint publication, for which he engaged seven authors for individual historical periods. Already, with my treatise titled "The Distant Past of Hussitism,"<sup>127</sup> I tried to dissociate myself from the continuing abuse of this remote era of Czech and European history in political arguments. It is no wonder that I tried to free myself from the ideological ballast, since I had to weigh every word in my research. With hindsight, I can see that it was a thirsty man's voice calling in the desert. After November 1989, it became a fashion and a need to turn history inside out again, to make it into a mirror in which we would like to see ourselves and which, at the same time, hides our stupidity and inability to understand our own world. Not even the Hussite movement was free from this.

**PR:** *How did you experience and perceive the events that followed August 1968?*

**FŠ:** Quite soon after the invasion of the occupying armies, feelings of uncertainty blended with heightened emotions, transitioning sometimes to euphoria of a fatefully unified national solidarity. The near future could not bring anything good, particularly in an academic insti-

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<sup>126</sup> František Graus, "Naše živá i mrtvá minulost" [Our living and dead past], in *Naše živá i mrtvá minulost: 8 esejí o českých dějinách* [Our living and dead past: 8 essays on Czech history], ed. František Graus (Prague: Svoboda, 1968), 7–25.

<sup>127</sup> František Šmahel, "Vzdálená minulost husitství" [The distant past of Hussitism], in *Naše živá i mrtvá minulost*, 44–71.

tute which caught the undesirable attention of the occupying power with the “Black Book.” After a hectic period of work that the urgent need for documentation of the Soviet invasion demanded, a slowdown came, with us sitting around over coffee, reading newspapers, and talking about current events. I had the feeling that nobody was doing any research at the institute. This was not the case, but generally speaking, it was as if the previous striving for a new direction of historiography no longer made any sense.

Thanks to my distance from the events during the critical week of August, I wondered what would be next before the direct participants of the distressing events did. It was clear that the hundreds of thousands of members of the occupying armies, perhaps as many as half a million, undoubtedly meant the end of Dubček’s socialism with a human face. It was only a question of time when the totalitarian regime would be restored. It did not occur to me that the Institute of History could be closed, but I was almost certain that the regime would lay its hand on me. I tried to prepare for the inevitable. I put up defenses for myself and my family, although I felt like an ice hockey goalkeeper who has put a circle of crushed ice around himself for defense.

Of the possible options I ruled out emigration. My wife had had a weak heart from her childhood on and had to be under constant medical supervision. After moving to Prague, she did not want to emigrate, especially when both children refused to change their environment again after such a short time. In addition, there were linguistic barriers and in my case also a feeling of belonging to the land of my ancestors. Like many others, I could not imagine that I would never return to my native region. Therefore, I did not respond to an offer of work at Columbia University in New York, which was facilitated by Vojtěch Mastný.<sup>128</sup> I certainly could have supported myself and my family in exile, but it was already too late for me to reach more ambitious goals as a historian in a foreign milieu. Surprisingly, my decision was approved of by the Polish medieval scholar Alexander Gieysztor.<sup>129</sup> In his opinion, the place of a historian was in his native land, not in exile.

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<sup>128</sup> Vojtěch Mastný (b.1936), Czech-American historian.

<sup>129</sup> Alexander Gieysztor (1916–99), Polish medievalist.



I could not count on being able to stay at the academic institute. This was confirmed by a message from Associate Professor Václav Král<sup>130</sup> from the Faculty of Arts, a powerful man under the emerging “normalization,”<sup>131</sup> who recommended that I find a post in the National Museum in good time. This surprised me because he presided over the vetting commission that expelled me from the party at the beginning of 1970. Moreover, I was to him, along with Jiří Kořalka,<sup>132</sup> an embodiment of the Western stream in historiography, although he regarded both of us as hardworking historians. To this day I cannot explain why he warned me. The fact that I did not listen to him certainly did not help me in his eyes, but I was determined to make use of the study possibilities of the institute as long as I could.

**PR:** *Were you still working on Jerome of Prague at that time?*

**FŠ:** To a limited extent, yes. During my foreign trips, I had browsed through dozens of catalogues of manuscript collections, without finding a hitherto unknown treatise by Jerome. However, I did discover a surprising quantity of anonymous *questiones*, tractates, and commentaries, with which the authors of the catalogues did not know what to do. As Jerome had the reputation of being a proponent of a realistic interpretation of the universals, according to the teachings of Oxford professor John Wycliffe, I selected for my study a group of sources on the well-known dispute over the universals. I could hardly have approached the topic under normal circumstances because it required thousands of photocopies, which I had no way of obtaining. But, in the autumn of 1968, an opportunity arose for procuring most of them, because the decline of activity at the institute was reflected in an increased free capacity of the institute’s photo laboratory. Both of my colleagues working there were most obliging, and I was treated with the same consideration by curators

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<sup>130</sup> Václav Král (1926–84), Czech historian.

<sup>131</sup> “Normalization” (Czech: *normalizace*) is the name commonly used for the period 1969–87, which was characterized by initial restoration of the conditions prevailing before the Prague Spring reform period (1963/1967–1968), first of all, the firm rule of the Communist Party and the persecution of dissidents.

<sup>132</sup> Jiří Kořalka (1931–2015), Czech historian.

of the large manuscript collections in the Prague libraries. It sounds unbelievable, but in large bags we carried away dozens of medieval manuscripts from the Library of the National Museum as well as from the Library of the Metropolitan Chapter. We returned them in the same way after making photocopies. Emma Urbánková also allowed me to take pictures right in the study room of the university library (now the National Library). This was unheard of before then or after. I found full understanding even in foreign libraries, so that in a few years I had the collection of sources at my disposal, the quantity of which surpassed the possibilities of one historian and would need the work of a team.

Before long, some secretaries began to ask if I had any work for them. It occurred to me that I could create a systematic documentation of the history of the Hussite Revolution. Day after day, I looked for editions of medieval texts for the secretaries, from which they copied the editorial summaries of individual documents and specific passages I marked as important. In about a year I had card files which I sorted chronologically and then by person and place. This documentation did not serve me immediately until only years later, when it very much facilitated the work on the *History of Tábor*<sup>133</sup> and the four volumes of *The Hussite Revolution*.<sup>134</sup>

**PR:** *The work on Jerome of Prague then initiated the building of a systematic thematic database. Today, at a time of extensive and easily accessible Internet databases and digitized documents, the description of your approach and method of realization sounds almost surreal.*

*But let us return to your activities: At the same time, you managed “to bring into the world” a journal that is already legendary in medieval studies today: Mediaevalia Bohemica. Even under other circumstances, creating this journal would really mean stepping out of the national discourse to an internationalization of Czech historiography—something which, with lesser or greater success, we have been striving for to this day.*

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<sup>133</sup> František Šmahel, *Dejiny Tábora* [The history of Tabor], 2 vols (České Budějovice: Jihočeské Nakl., 1988–90).

<sup>134</sup> František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce* [The Hussite revolution], 4 vols (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 1995–96).

**FS:** Looking back, I cannot believe all the things that I accomplished then. I succeeded in obtaining approval for *Mediaevalia Bohemica* from the director of the institute as early as in the first half of 1968. It was to be published exclusively in foreign languages. Thanks to Jarmila Horáková, a most duteous secretary to Graus who knew foreign languages, all four issues were to the highest standard then attainable. In the Latin foreword, it was said that the journal would be of interdisciplinary character and that it would be accessible to all authors regardless of nationality, religion, or status. This was not merely wishful thinking, as can be seen in the contents of the individual issues.

The *Supplementa* of *Mediaevalia Bohemica* were determined for the publication of the proceedings of the Prague international symposia. Two of them, which took place in 1965 (*Symposium Hussianum Pragensense*) and 1967 (*Symposium Hussianum Pragensense II*), were devoted to the Hussite movement and the Reformation, with a time overlap to the sixteenth century. The third, planned for September 1969, was to go back farther to the Middle Ages.

Although the dispute over the crisis of feudalism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had lost some of its momentum by the end of the 1960s, the general theme of crisis remained relevant. František Graus prepared discussion materials for the symposium, which came out in the first issue of *Supplementa*.<sup>135</sup> Graus finished his paper on December 31, 1968, at a time when he was purposefully preparing for emigration.

We preferred to hold the symposium outside of Prague, in the conference center of the Slovak Academy of Sciences at the chateau of Smolenice. The comfortable, freshly renovated chateau at the foothills of the Small Carpathians was rented by Josef Macek thanks to his contact with representatives of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The preparations were again entrusted to me. Of the foreign colleagues, Bylina, Delaruelle, Fink, Kaminsky,<sup>136</sup> and Seibt came again, and we also wel-

<sup>135</sup> František Graus, "Das Spätmittelalter als Krisenzeit: Ein Literaturbericht als Zwischenbilanz" [The late Middle Ages as a period of crisis: A literature report as interim balance], *Mediaevalia Bohemica: Supplementum* 1 (1969): 1–75.

<sup>136</sup> Howard Kaminsky (1924–2014), US-American historian.

comed Bernard Guennée,<sup>137</sup> Rodney H. Hilton,<sup>138</sup> Heinrich Koller,<sup>139</sup> Franz Machilek,<sup>140</sup> and Heiko A. Obermann.<sup>141</sup>

After Graus's introductory presentation on the crisis of the Middle Ages in relation to Hussitism, it was time for papers by the Czech and Slovak historians, which did not sound like they had been drafted at a time of bleak existential uncertainty. A lively and critical discussion of the papers that we read was also to a high standard. Everyone present noticed the agitated atmosphere at the gathering, which was to be the last. This knowledge made the mutual sympathies more sincere and the memories of the Smolenice symposium longer lasting.

**PR:** *The end of the Prague symposia in their original form was connected with the end of the Institute of History, which paid so heavily for the "Black Book." For Czech historiography, it was indisputably an irreplaceable loss: a loss of the leading personalities of the institute.*

**FŠ:** Graus managed to publish his introductory paper in the *Czechoslovak Historical Journal*, in 1969; on April 1 of the next year his permit to stay abroad expired—he was a visiting professor then at the University in Basel—and from the perspective of the state authorities he became an emigrant and therefore an enemy of the state. In the meantime, Josef Macek had resigned his membership on the presidium of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in November 1969. On February 25, 1970, he was dismissed as director of the Institute of History, whose closure and the establishment of a new Institute of Czechoslovak and World History on March 1 of that year had already been decided. A prewar Marxist and expert on "decadent imperialism," Oldřich Říha,<sup>142</sup> was appointed as interim director. This was in revenge for the "Black Book." It was also a one-off purge, because all of the employees were called for job interviews again. Whoever did not pass lost their "work book," as Jiří Kořalka put it ironically.

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137 Bernard Guennée (1927–2010), French medievalist.

138 Rodney H. Hilton (1916–2002), British medievalist.

139 Heinrich Koller (1924–2013), Austrian historian.

140 Franz Machilek (b.1934), German historian.

141 Heiko A. Obermann (1930–2001), Dutch historian and theologian.

142 Oldřich Říha (1911–74), Czech historian.

At the same time, there was a clear differentiation between party members who were “expelled” from the party at the beginning of the normalization process and those who were “crossed out.” The “expelled” ones had caused offense to the Communist Party and could immediately start to pack up. The “crossed out” ones were regarded more leniently, although they also bore the mark of Cain of political unfitness for the future. I was among the expelled ones. Principally, as chair of the trade union branch at the institute, I had signed all kinds of things, including official documents related to the “Black Book.” Besides, as a member of the editorial board of *Dějiny a současnost* I was jointly responsible for critical articles published in the journal, which revealed biased manipulation of historical sources in the works of the historian Václav Král, who was the head of my vetting commission in 1970.

There were too many expelled members at the institute, so their dismissals had to be spread over a longer period so as to maintain a semblance of normal functioning at the renamed institute. After the first wave of purges it was shown that I was still regarded as the only expert remaining in the institute for such an important topic as Husitism. I was therefore given a chance to be admitted to the new institute and had to undergo a degrading competition for a post, with obligatory written self-criticism. Jaroslav Mezník summed this up for us many years later: “One could hardly write anything that would put him at risk, but, on the other hand, it was repugnant to him to renounce his beliefs and repent for his activities.”<sup>143</sup>

The new director soon appointed the members of the governing body of the new institute, including non-party man Josef Janáček, who became one of his deputies. In the competition, the medievalists Jaroslav Mezník, Dušan Třeštík, and Jiří Spěváček passed, so it seemed that against all odds the new director wanted a scientifically sound institute. That was proved in my job interview, when Janáček emphasized the necessity of my participation in the planned *Overview of Czech and Slovak History*. Perhaps also for that reason, I received a contract from October 1, 1970, to December 31, 1971, but I could not remain in the position of editor in chief of the journal *Mediaevalia Bohemica*.

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<sup>143</sup> Mezník, *Můj život za vlády komunistů*, 156.

Nevertheless, the new director—Professor Říha—was complimentary about my books. I later heard from Otto Wichterle that he had known Říha during the war as a brave and resolute man, who had been elected president of the Creussen concentration camp council by liberated prisoners. Human fates are complicated and sometimes surpass normal notions. One more accidental circumstance contributed to Říha keeping me at the institute for another three years: short-term contracts did not have to be submitted for approval by the apparatus of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, so he could renew them for me every three months.

In March 1971, when Oldřich Říha assumed the governance of the new institute, the time came for the Fourth Prague Symposium on the topic of Tábor and the Hussite Revolution. Říha did not want to cancel the symposium with such an important topic; he only postponed it to early autumn. As a keynote paper by Josef Macek was out of question, the task was allotted to me. Medievalists whose quality could not be questioned took on the other presentations. Inter alia, Zdeňka Hledíková,<sup>144</sup> Ivan Hlaváček, František Hoffmann,<sup>145</sup> Jaroslav Mezník, and Pavel Spunar<sup>146</sup> appeared in Tábor, and of the foreign nationals, Ferdinand Seibt. As usual, I always had something to arrange, so I arrived late for our shared lunches and dinners. There is a tale to this. When I was once the last to arrive in the cafeteria in Tábor, I saw Říha sitting at one table alone and somewhat hunched over. I asked if I could join him, and with that I unintentionally broke the carapace of the ostracism he had been exposed to—in this case undeservedly, because only thanks to him could the symposium take place.

**PR:** *At that time, you had problems with the publication of your work, just like a number of your colleagues.*

**F5:** The majority of the papers for the Fourth Prague Symposium were willingly accepted for publication by the editorial board of the *South Bohemian Historical Anthology* (*Jihočeský sborník historický*), which very

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<sup>144</sup> Zdeňka Hledíková (b.1938), Czech medievalist.

<sup>145</sup> František Hoffmann (1920–2015), Czech historian.

<sup>146</sup> Pavel Spunar (b.1928), Czech historian.

quickly reserved a special issue for them. An unwritten ban on publishing then affected a number of authors, including myself. It was often a matter of chance whether already printed books would arrive on book counters to be sold. Thus, a seminal monograph, *Praha před husitskou revolucí* (Prague before the Hussite Revolution) by Jaroslav Mezník, was luckless: its printing plates were destroyed.

Damocles's sword also hung over my book *Idea národa v husitských Čechách*, which had been created by revising and expanding two lengthier essays in the journal *Historica*.<sup>147</sup> Luckily, Robert Sak<sup>148</sup> expressed an interest in publishing the book, and thanks to him the České Budějovice publishing house Růže accepted the book. But the secretary for ideological affairs at the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was to decide its fate. Comrade Milan Vondruška<sup>149</sup> called me, reminisced about his studies, and said that he had nothing against the book on Hussitism, although it was not in the spirit of the works by Josef Macek from the 1950s, which were apparently better received. He permitted *The Idea of the Nation in Hussite Bohemia* to go to press. A year later this would not have been possible, as the screws of repression had further tightened.

The regional secretary apparently did not know that another of my books, *Hranice pravdy* (The stake of truth), which the press Naše vojsko (Our Army) published as a paperback in a series of detective and spy stories called *Magnet*, had aroused the interest of military counterintelligence based on a denunciation.<sup>150</sup> Naše vojsko was controlled by the Ministry of National Defence, and therefore under stricter oversight. The series *Magnet* was run by the poet Jaromír Hořec,<sup>151</sup> who earned his livelihood in that way. Shortly after the demonstrative self-immolation of Jan Palach and another two students, he had the idea that Hus's death in flames at Constance could serve as a certain parallel to these unprecedented acts. I accepted the offer to write a popular

<sup>147</sup> František Šmahel, "The Idea of the Nation in Hussite Bohemia," *Historica* 16 (1969): 143–247 and *Historica* 17 (1969): 93–197.

<sup>148</sup> Robert Sak (1932–2014), Czech historian.

<sup>149</sup> Milan Vondruška (b.1925), Czech politician, minister of education (1975–87).

<sup>150</sup> František Šmahel, *Hranice pravdy* [The stake of truth], *Magnet: periodická řada* 1/70 (Prague: Vydavatelství Magnet, 1969).

<sup>151</sup> Jaromír Hořec (1921–2009).

scholarly book, but I refused to engage in the historical parallels. I wrote about the timeless and, at the same time, current importance of Hus's story at Constance in an epilogue of the book entitled "Pravda nezvítězí sama" (Truth will not prevail alone).<sup>152</sup> And it was precisely this epilogue that interested counterintelligence, because it began with the sentence: "After 550 and some years, stakes with books and burning human torches are just as common a phenomenon as they were for Hus's contemporaries." Nevertheless, during my interrogation, the two officers were satisfied for some reason with the explanation that I meant Buddhist monks, and filed the denunciation ad acta. *Hranice pravdy* had a print run of 55,000 copies; a biography of Jan Žižka, which I published at the same time through the publishing house Melantrich, barely amounted to a tenth of this number.

For a short time, a play of allegories was revived. Journals with surviving reformist editorial boards again tended towards topics from earlier Czech history. In the last issue of the popular weekly *Reportér* I published a treatise entitled "Králi sluší cesta královská" (The Royal Way Becomes the King) and in the journal *Univerzita Karlova* (Charles University) an essay on tolerance and freedom of speech. I still wrote entirely freely, and I published as much as I could while I could; bleak prospects of the future spurred me on. The noose around the expelled and undesirable authors tightened in 1971. My study on the anti-ideal of the town in the work of Petr Chelčický could only be published in 1972 because the first publication of the *Czechoslovak Historical Journal* in 1971 had already been prepared for the press by the old editorial board, under the direction of Josef Janáček. Even so, he deleted the word "anti-ideal" from the title twice in the corrections, because everything that was "anti" was in itself suspicious, but I put the phrase back in the title in the final press proof.

The time had come to save whatever could be saved. All of the decision-making at that time was more complicated, as there were good people and real experts on both sides of the divide in a divided society. At the new institute, Dušan Třeštík and Božena Kopičková<sup>153</sup> re-

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<sup>152</sup> František Šmahel, "Pravda nezvítězí sama" [Truth will not prevail alone], in Šmahel, *Hranice pravdy*, 153–56.

<sup>153</sup> Božena Kopičková (b.1939), Czech historian.



mained, inter alia, the editors being Jaroslav Eršil and Jiří Spěváček. Both Jaroslavs, Marek and Mezník, continued to work temporarily at the Brno branch.

**PR:** *In your narration, the turbulent time at the beginning of the normalization process at the turn of the 1970s stops being black-and-white—and at the same time, which is noteworthy, it does not become grey. Currently the division into black, white, and grey is quite normal—we imagine white dissidents, black collaborationists, and a grey “silent majority,” but things were evidently more complicated. It is only paradoxical that historiography cannot capture this, as only memories can.*

**FŠ:** I can tell a story that typifies the atmosphere then. In early summer of 1971, I was invited by Professor Zdeněk Fiala to a pub at Bílá Hora, where a colleague from Graus's seminar, Miroslav Štěpánek, also stopped by. Both tried to explain to me what they intended to do in the current situation to secure the continuation of medieval studies' promising development. Through new posts—Štěpánek was to become the director of the Encyclopedia Institute of the Academy of Sciences—they would be able to influence events positively, but at the price of certain sacrifices. One of the strategic maneuvers was to be mild criticism of those who would otherwise have been at risk of a harsh condemnation threatening their existence. Zdeněk Fiala meant particularly Dušan Třeštík, who was supposedly in danger as a close friend of František Graus. Then, Fiala's critical rebukes appeared in the *Czechoslovak Historical Journal* against Třeštík, which did hurt him, because no other criticism was levelled at him. Similarly, Fiala's efforts came to nothing when he appointed a party member with many inferiority complexes, and who could not hold a candle to his subordinates, as his deputy in the Department of Auxiliary Historical Sciences in the middle of the 1970s. It turned out better for the journal *Mediaevalia Bohemica*, whose direction he assumed formally. A lengthy, third 1970 issue was already in print, as well as the last, fourth issue, which came out shortly after I was fired from the institute in 1974. I had compiled the issue in its entirety with the assistance of two or three colleagues from the original editorial board.

Those are all small pieces in the mosaic of the time, which left its mark on hundreds of thousands of human lives. Many of my former colleagues were struggling for bare existence. The scholar of contemporary history Jan Tesař<sup>154</sup> and the medievalist Jaroslav Mezník had already been imprisoned for their political views.

**PR:** *Soon you would meet with the hostility of normalization.*

**F5:** By 1973, the repression against expelled members of the party and independents who were engaged in the revival process of the Prague Spring was already in full swing. My bibliography from that year is ample evidence of this—it has only two items: my writing for the *International Bibliography of Humanism and the Renaissance* and a delayed article in the *Archival Journal*. Things were similar the next year. My article for the 550th anniversary of the death of the Hussite military leader Jan Žižka had to come out under an assumed name.

The first of my colleagues to give me a chance to make some money on the side was Miroslav Štěpánek, the director of the Encyclopedia Institute. I compiled about thirty entries related to the Hussite period for the first volume of an illustrated encyclopedic dictionary. With that, my cooperation with him ended, because he had developed a taste for power and keeping in touch with me began to threaten his career. In one accidental meeting, he bragged about coming from the party hotel “Praha,” where he had written overnight a speech for the notorious ideological secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Jan Fojtík.<sup>155</sup>

I do not remember whether I received other offers for similar work, besides for the handbook *Historical Events: Europe*,<sup>156</sup> for which I wrote anonymously a chapter on the Middle Ages at the request of the editor Miroslav Hroch.<sup>157</sup> This methodologically well-conceived handbook was later published in Slovakia.

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<sup>154</sup> Jan Tesař (b.1933), Czech historian.

<sup>155</sup> Jan Fojtík (b.1928), Czech politician, main ideologist of the Communist Party during the so-called normalization, responsible for the areas of culture, science, and media.

<sup>156</sup> Miroslav Hroch, ed., *Historické události: Evropa—Datová příručka* [Historical events: Europe—A Handbook] (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1977).

<sup>157</sup> Miroslav Hroch (b.1932), Czech historian.

**PR:** *We still used it in the first half of the 1990s, in preparation for the examinations in general history. It was excellent and eminently practical—in the pre-Internet time, of course. Did no one else offer you any similar work?*

**FŠ:** A really exceptional case was my participation in an extensive project, “Antiquity and Czech Culture” (*Antika a česká kultura*). It was an honor for me when the Department of Greek, Roman, and Latin Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences entrusted me with editing the second chapter, devoted to the world of antiquity and Bohemian scholarship in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>158</sup> We spent several years on the work, and this cooperation with acknowledged experts enriched me immensely. When it turned out that the names of the two editors, mine and that of a professor in Olomouc, Jiří Daňhelka,<sup>159</sup> could not be listed, all of the authors agreed to publish the work anonymously. Three university professors then assumed the responsibility as directors of the editorial board. In my milieu this was a rare expression of solidarity by thirty members of the authors’ team.

Otherwise, I was not interested in an occasional publication under an assumed name because I wanted to spend all of my free time in scholarly work to keep *à jour*. I no longer wanted to play the unseemly game of hide-and-seek; therefore, I decided to publish abroad and only in prestigious scholarly journals. This may sound conceited, but I wanted to avoid people guessing who the real author was and avoid the danger of ideologization or politicization that was looming from one side or the other. It was precisely through resistance to the politicization of my own research that I, in my own way, ruled out my participation in active political dissent.

From 1970, new items began to appear in my bibliography following the earlier sporadic ones, because I began to cooperate with the architect Jindřich Santar,<sup>160</sup> who was famous for writing concepts for representative national exhibitions. After being expelled from the party, he found

<sup>158</sup> František Šmahel, “Svět antiky a česká vzdělanost ve 14. a 15. Století” [The world of antiquity and the Czech learned culture in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries], in *Antika a česká kultura* [Antiquity and Czech culture], ed. Ladislav Varcl, et al. (Prague: Academia, 1978).

<sup>159</sup> Jiří Daňhelka (1919–93), Czech philologist.

<sup>160</sup> Jindřich Santar (1923–2012), Czech architect.

employment in a sector that would have been beneath him before, in the expositions of regional museums. He sought coworkers for earlier history and particularly Hussitism who would draft the libretti and concepts of the exhibitions for him. He then added refined passages with which he had enthralled people before. In this regard, he was a real master of his craft, and I learned a lot from him. Our cooperation began in 1970 on the large exposition of the Museum of the Hussite Revolutionary Movement in Tábor. Over the next decade, there followed, inter alia, monuments to Jan Žižka in Trocnov and Přebyslav, new museum expositions in Žlutice, Karlovy Vary, and Strakonice, and in the house of the preachers in the Bethlehem Chapel. The fees were good and came in handy for me. After 1980, our cooperation stopped, but I maintained contact with a number of artists in Santar's team, particularly with the future professor of the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague, Zdeněk Ziegler,<sup>161</sup> who produced graphic designs for a number of my books.

**PR:** *What actually happened with the "Overview of Czech and Slovak History," on the basis of which you were kept at the institute after 1968 by Oldřich Říha and Josef Janáček? What in the end caused your dismissal?*

**FŠ:** All the time, Director Říha was pressing Josef Janáček, whom he had appointed as editor of the *Overview*, to speed up the work. I finished the work on the *Overview* shortly before the death of Říha on August 31, 1974. In 1980, when the first volume of the *Overview* came out with a great delay, I was surprisingly listed among the authors, but six years had already passed since my departure from the institute.<sup>162</sup> Říha's successor, Jaroslav Purš,<sup>163</sup> no longer needed me; just before Christmas 1974 he notified Jiří Kořalka and me that he was not allowed to sign another contract with us at the behest of the party.

**PR:** *That was an unpleasant Christmas present. What happened next? Did any alternative offer itself at that time?*

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<sup>161</sup> Zdeněk Ziegler (b.1932), Czech graphic designer.

<sup>162</sup> Jaroslav Purš and Miroslav Kropilak, eds., *Přehled dějin Československa I* [An overview of Czech and Slovak history], 2 vols (Prague: Academia, 1980–82).

<sup>163</sup> Jaroslav Purš (1922–97), Czech historian.

**FŠ:** I had about ten days to find a job. My wife's heart weakness began to become obvious; also, my daughter developed a serious health issue, which the school doctor did not diagnose as poor functioning of the thyroid. Under these circumstances, I could not drag my feet. I did not in any case want to become an accountant or a clerk—I was afraid that routine work in an office would torment me to death. Considering my vetting profile, it would not have been easy, after all. After my experience in the mines, I ruled out strenuous physical labor that would drain me of the energy needed for concentrated scholarly work. I did not, under any circumstance, want to give up the scholarly work, although at that time I was only able to set myself a single goal, namely regular reading of scholarly journals and publications. There was no chance of creative work; at that moment this was quite clear.

Chance came my way to sway my decision, as it had done several other times in my life. Precisely the day when I received my notice, I was going home in a tram when I saw a flyer recruiting drivers for the municipal public transport company. The idea crossed my mind that this could be a solution for me: I would be my own boss, have a roof over my head, and, all things considered, a decent wage. I preferred trams to buses because driving on rails seemed safer to me. The hardest part was passing the psychomotor tests. Thanks to good reflexes, I set out with a tram on my own on the streets of Prague after two months of intensive training. This snippet of news was broadcast the very same day by Radio Free Europe. Even without this publicity, the legend of a bearded tram driver carrying foreign-language books and writing materials at the depot soon spread. I was sought out shortly afterwards by Robert Horák,<sup>164</sup> former secretary of the Czechoslovak Society for Spreading Political and Scientific Knowledge, a good acquaintance of Josef Macek, and future signatory of Charter 77, and he offered me work in a newly built Kotva department store. It turned out that I had caught the attention of a support network of expelled Prague Spring public figures. He said he could get me a job driving a new delivery truck with which I would travel long distances, but that discouraged me, notwithstanding the fact that I would most likely not know how to go about repairing the truck.

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<sup>164</sup> Robert Horák (b.1921).

My new occupation had many unpleasant aspects, starting with getting up early and ending with obscenities from the permanently dissatisfied passengers, but I carried friends and acquaintances every now and then, and I exchanged news with them. A number of people felt sorry for me, others expressed sympathy. Several similarly affected acquaintances were not able to bear the new burden. They ended up at the psychiatrist's or muddled along in various ways. Luckily, the arrogance of the white collar workers looking down on the manual workers was alien to my nature. I was given renewed self-confidence by my somewhat younger Canadian colleague, John Martin Klassen,<sup>165</sup> who took my new occupation as a matter of course, because when he was unemployed for two years in Chicago he also made his living as a bus driver.

**PR:** *The story of Klassen is characteristic—even today it is sometimes necessary to go through a series of jobs before one gets the chance to do what one really desires to do. But I do not think you can compare your situation then to Klassen's. How did you become accustomed to the new milieu?*

**FS:** After the experience I had already had with the working-class environment, I did not mention my academic degrees to anyone at the tram depot. People had not yet lost respect for education, though they did not like it when someone acted superior to them. I broke my academic incognito after a longer period when I was on standby duty at the depot, waiting with one younger driver to stand in for sick coworkers. We were both reading; the colleague finished first, put down the book, which I recognized as my *The Stake of Truth*, and glanced at my photograph on the back cover. He looked at me, looked again at the photograph, and then asked: "Is it really you?" I nodded; it made no sense to hide it. He did not keep this to himself and so, all of a sudden, I gained respect with many colleagues and some dispatchers. They had a significant influence on the rosters and, in the end, also on the bonuses. That brought me some small advantages, but what had an even greater importance was that they willingly switched shifts with me when, from time to time, I needed to travel to my promised land, Poland.

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<sup>165</sup> John Martin Klassen (b.1939), Canadian historian.

This happened immediately in December 1975, when I left for a conference on the culture of the Polish elites and lower classes at the end of the Middle Ages. The invitation, which I had received from Bronisław Geremek, was perceived in the medievalist circles as a brave act and manifestation of solidarity with one of the politically proscribed Czech historians. Being the head of a section of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Geremek risked a lot personally, and perhaps this was one of the reasons why a pleiad of the best Polish medievalists came to the conference in secluded Kazimierz Dolny. The theme of the conference itself was exciting due to its probing nature. The trend of the conference was set by Geremek, from whose speech it was clear that he was responding to the stimuli of the French *Annales* School. The other Polish participants did not lag behind. For me, the asking of questions was inspiring by itself, and although my paper on the literacy of the lower classes in Bohemia elicited some response, I realized with bitterness how Czech medieval studies were falling behind the innovative schools of the Western and Polish historiography.

After returning to Prague, at Advent time, I saw through the tram window on one of my rides down Spálená Street a man with a ladder and a bucket of water, who waved at me. I recognized him as a classmate from the faculty who had managed to become ordained as a priest, but could not legally officiate for political reasons. Against the regulations, I stopped, we greeted one another and arranged the handover of color portraits of Pope John Paul II, which I had brought from Poland. The man was the future Czech primate and cardinal, Miloslav Vlk.<sup>166</sup>

When I look back from a great distance at the five years of my service on Prague's trams, I realize in addition that they had an adverse effect on me. To be able to do my scholarly work I had to limit the wider circle of my interests. This most affected my reading of books of fiction, but I also lost contact with events on the art scene. That meant that after 1989 I could not find my bearings in the profusion of post-modern and other movements. Worst of all, I was deprived on the trams of the reading of great novels by Anatole France, Romain Rol-

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166 Miloslav Vlk (1932–2017), Archbishop of Prague (1991–2010).

land, Leo Tolstoy, and the brothers Mann: all the great narratives which we, historians, absorb as constituents of our own creative process of conceiving our own narratives.

**PR:** *Let us return to Poland again and to Polish medieval studies, which, as you said, developed much more favorably than Czech medieval studies. Can you describe in more depth the character of your Polish contacts then?*

**F5:** The contacts that I had established with the research group of Stefan Swieżawski<sup>167</sup> during my stay in Cracow in October 1969 brought me not only permanent friendly relations with Mieczysław Markowski and Jerzy B. Korolec,<sup>168</sup> but also publication possibilities, which I had lost at home. Although it may sound strange, it was precisely in the years of my employment at the transport company that I finished my “List of Sources on the Prague Dispute Over *universalia realia*.”<sup>169</sup> The listing of the sources was a suitable professional activity for several-hour segments of free time, because I could quite easily continue the interrupted work. During the research, I also accumulated a number of interesting manuscript texts of Polish provenience, whose overview the Polish colleagues accepted for their revue *Studia mediewistyczne* (Medieval Studies). I published other studies in that journal as well.

However, in a more important gesture of solidarity, they reserved the entire twenty-fifth edition of the foreign-language revue intended to be distributed abroad for my “List.” They also set a generous fee for me, but I had to utilize it on site. The sum sufficed for a week-long stay of our entire family in Warsaw’s Hotel Bristol and the purchase of high-quality clothes, because department stores in Warsaw were full of Western goods, as a consequence of dollar loans, with which party leader Edward Gierek<sup>170</sup> mollified the growing popular discontent.

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167 Stefan Swieżawski (1907–2004), Polish historian.

168 Jerzy B. Korolec (1933–2000), Polish historian.

169 František Šmahel, “Verzeichnis der Quellen zum Prager Universalienstreit 1348–1500,” *Mediævalia Philosophica Polonorum* 25 (1980): 1–189. Later published as František Šmahel, “Prolegomena zum Prager Universalienstreit,” in *Die Prager Universität im Mittelalter – The Charles University in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 490–504.

170 Edward Gierek (1913–2001), First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party (1970–80).



On my journeys to Poland, I usually recovered in spirit. Whereas the majority of my colleagues at the academy and universities could not obtain permission to participate in international conferences, I could from time to time use the invitations of my Polish friends, which helped me continue my scholarly work. What was especially important to me was participation at the Warsaw Congress of Comparative Church History in the summer of 1978. I became personally acquainted with a number of renowned colleagues, with whom I then remained in contact for many years. Lublin professor and hero of the Warsaw Uprising Jerzy Kłoczowski<sup>171</sup> welcomed me heartily to his team, which was working on the minorites and Franciscans in Polish territory. I also read a paper at another conference on comparative Church history, which was held in Lublin in 1996, and I responded to its stimulus to revive the work of the Czech Commission for Church History in the Czech Lands.

In Warsaw, I could personally thank Augsburg professor of Church history Walter Brandmüller,<sup>172</sup> who had given me an opportunity to have my works published in his journal *Annuario historiae conciliorum* as early as in 1975. Thereafter, I met Professor Brandmüller quite regularly, most often in Munich, and after 1998, when he became president of the Papal Commission for Historical Sciences, at his residence in the Vatican. In 2010, he was rewarded by the Holy See for his services in the form of a cardinal's hat.

No less heartening to me was the acquaintance with Jean Delumeau,<sup>173</sup> a professor at the Collège de France and author of a number of popular books on the European Reformation and Counter-Reformation. He did not object to probing into the earlier centuries and, as a Catholic influenced by the aggiornamento of the Second Vatican Council, was open to discussions with ideologically oriented historians. Several years later, I received from him an invitation that in many regards shaped my scholarly maturing.

Foreign friends and colleagues entered into my story effortlessly, without my guiding them there intentionally. There would be more of

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<sup>171</sup> On Jerzy Kłoczowski, see the introduction on p. 7.

<sup>172</sup> Walter Brandmüller (b.1929), German theologian and cardinal.

<sup>173</sup> Jean Delumeau (b.1923), French historian.

them in good time. I have been in contact with some of them to this day; others I saw only occasionally; others let me know about themselves through the publications that they sent to me. Through Josef Polišenský I became acquainted with a younger English historian, Robert Evans,<sup>174</sup> who very meritoriously helped to support the research on Bohemian studies and throughout his illustrious career has remained a kind and humble man. Likewise, at the turn of the 1970s I could not have had any idea of the unique intellectual and professional qualities of Peter Brown,<sup>175</sup> a leading expert on religion and society in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. His book on St. Augustine opened up new worlds for me.

My elementary studies raised through the Polish mediation an awareness of the scholarly circles working on the history of universities and Late Scholasticism. When I was still working at the academy, I received an invitation to an international conference on universities at the end of the Middle Ages, which took place at the end of May 1975 in Leuven. I could no longer attend the conference, but I was still asked for a written paper. The go-between here was a historian of late-medieval and Renaissance philosophy, Charles B. Schmitt,<sup>176</sup> then a professor in Leeds, working also at the Warburg Institute in London. It turned out that printed papers could meet with a livelier scholarly response than personal participation in a conference. I realized this in the following years, because the Leuven anthology was the first of a numerous series of conference anthologies in which I could only participate from afar. This was also the case of a conference initiated by Astrik L. Gabriel,<sup>177</sup> a Hungarian emigrant who found his feet at the University of Notre Dame in the United States. The expert on the history of the medieval Sorbonne, who was thirty years my senior, had already done me a great favor by supplying me with his and others' publications, which helped me very much in my research on university history. He was also the one who mediated via Aleksandr Gieysztor the publication

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<sup>174</sup> Robert Evans (b.1943), English historian.

<sup>175</sup> Peter Brown (b.1935), Irish historian, Rollins Professor of History Emeritus at Princeton University.

<sup>176</sup> Charles B. Schmitt (1933–84), US-American historian.

<sup>177</sup> Astrik L. Gabriel (1907–2005), Hungarian historian.

of my study, written in German, on the Central European reception of the commentaries of the Parisian eclectic John Versor.<sup>178</sup>

**PR:** *You remember your friends and assistants abroad. How was it at home?*

**FŠ:** I will never forget the helpful hand of Ivan Hlaváček. When after my start at the Prague Transport Company I faced the risk of not getting back to history, Ivan offered that he would collect new books that might interest me. He was a bibliophile himself, the like of which I have known few, and his library contained real treasures for a historian of the Middle Ages. He acquired the majority of otherwise inaccessible foreign titles as a reliable author of reviews and annotations. Over the years, he had acquired such renown among the representatives of large publishing houses that they themselves began to offer him new publications in print. As I was a driver of a Prague tram, we could only meet every third Saturday. We could not always do this, so all the greater was our joy when we sat down amid piles of books.

It was certainly Ivan Hlaváček who mentioned me to his counterparts at Munich's institute Monumenta Germaniae Historica (MGH). Up until that time, I had not had direct contact with German medievalists, although I had covered a number of publications from German-language areas. The offer of a publication, which I received from Alexander Patschovsky,<sup>179</sup> a researcher at MGH, came therefore as a pleasant surprise for me. I am sure he sent it by agreement with the longtime president of that venerable institution, Horst Fuhrmann.<sup>180</sup> For editorial review, I selected a study of an unknown guide to the Prague Quodlibet by Bavarian Master Johann Arsen von Langenfeld.<sup>181</sup> The study was accepted, but only after it was edited by Patschovsky. At a relatively advanced age I underwent German training, which I was

178 František Šmahel, "Paris und Prag um 1450: Johannes Versor und seine böhmische Schule," *Studia Źródłoznawcze* 25 (1980): 65–77.

179 Alexander Patschovsky (b.1940), German medievalist.

180 Horst Fuhrmann (1926–2011), German medievalist.

181 František Šmahel, "Ein unbekanntes Prager Quodlibet von ca. 1400 des Magisters Johann Arsen von Langenfeld," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 33 (1977): 199–215.

lacking, and which I later complemented during many years of friendly cooperation with Alexander, who in 1988 became professor of medieval history at the University of Constance.

Time passed on the same beaten track until a sad Wednesday, November 7, 1979. That day I was on the morning shift, and in the afternoon I was to deliver a lecture at the National Museum. It was a rare honor for me because the meeting was organized by the Historical Circle, a venerable association of brave people that the regime tolerated. After an introduction, in which I was introduced by the president, Associate Professor František Kutnar,<sup>182</sup> I appeared in my tram-driver's uniform because I had not had time to change. Before that, just before four in the afternoon, when I was walking towards the museum, I felt a pain in the chest and I had to stop for a while. I later found out that this happened about the time when my wife Naďa died. After the lecture, I went home immediately. In the doorway, I was met by my apprehensive son Robert with the words: "Dad, mummy isn't home yet. But there was a policeman here and he said you should stop by the police station." The premonition became a harsh reality for us all.

**PR:** *That painful loss not only affected your family cruelly and at a very difficult time, because you lost a wife, who was a support for you, and the children lost their mother, but it also certainly changed the functioning of your household completely. You had to support the family by yourself on a tram driver's salary. And you had to cope with all that mentally and physically.*

**FŠ:** Yes. Unfortunately, work on the tram now clashed with care for children of school age. I sold the car to have a certain financial reserve, and my wife's sister prepared a meal plan for the whole month that corresponded to my abilities and possibilities. We prepared simple meals, nutritious and without any expensive ingredients. I should add that both children got used to this sustenance, and we remember it to this day when we all meet.

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<sup>182</sup> František Kutnar (1903–83), Czech historian.

I had to crawl out of the dark hole I had fallen into. I started to go running, lengthening the distances, so that I achieved a daily distance of five kilometers, which had been unimaginable for me before, but my hips soon refused this, and so I started swimming, in the summer preferably across the Hostivař dam. Thanks to that, I managed to lose weight, and thanks to my getting fitter I had more mental strength to tackle life's problems. I read a lot and listened avidly to classical music again.

**PR:** *How did your professional career develop?*

**FŠ:** In November and December 1979, I was still one of the Prague tram drivers, although I already contributed professionally here and there, from time to time. As I was working shifts it sometimes happened that I saw the children only in the morning or evening, so I could only follow their studies with difficulty and see how well they were doing at school. Besides, on the night shifts I faced the risk of microsleep from exhaustion, the scourge of all drivers. It was clear that I would have to find another job.

My older friend, Associate Professor Josef Petráň,<sup>183</sup> who was allowed to remain in the faculty, took a risky step and informed the then influential Associate Professor Antonín Robek,<sup>184</sup> one of the five so-called faculty normalizers, about my predicament. Associate Professor Robek did not speak with me; meeting with people of my type could have been disagreeable for him, as he was a highly placed party member. I do not remember how, but it was suggested to me that I should apply for a vacancy at the Central Bohemian Museum in Roztoky near Prague. I can only guess what led Robek to intervene in my favor: Normalization had become the norm and the new holders of power needed to raise the standard and efficiency of the institutions for which they were responsible. But a historian cannot unravel the mysteries of the human mind, so it might have been just common humanity, as help for me was sought by such a professional and moral authority as Josef Petráň.

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<sup>183</sup> Josef Petráň (1930–2017), Czech historian.

<sup>184</sup> Antonín Robek (1931–2008), Czech ethnographer.

The possibility that, as a historian expelled from the party, I could return to my original work was no longer a mere chimera. To me, the post offered to me in Roztoky meant a stepping stone to working at the Tábor Museum of the Hussite Revolutionary Movement, where I was to spend the next ten years. The circumstances of my admission to this institution illustrate very well what normalization was like by the end of the 1970s.

The new exposition at the museum in Tábor, for which I had produced a concept when I was still employed by the Institute of Czechoslovak History of the Academy of Sciences, was opened in May 1972. At this time, its director, František Crkovský,<sup>185</sup> had to leave the museum for political reasons; the party functionary Josef Schneider took his place. It apparently was a reward for his pro-Soviet position in August 1968. The opinions of the people who remember this inconsistent figure differ. I myself am among those who regard his reign in the museum as essentially positive. I knew him as a *bon vivant* with cultural interests, who thanks to his party background could protect things and people with whom other party members in responsible positions did not want to have anything to do. Schneider himself was not a historian, but he managed to recruit two young experts for the museum who were enthusiastic about Tábor history. One was archaeologist Miloš Drda,<sup>186</sup> the other archivist and historian Rudolf Tecl.<sup>187</sup> I had made their passing acquaintance during my time at the institute without realizing then what a serious role they would both play in my life.

By 1974, when I had almost changed seats from the office to a tram driver's cab from one day to the next, both of my colleagues in Tábor began to explore the possibilities of my employment at the museum. They came to ask me, but I had to tell them in truth that in the given situation I could not consider relocation. However, my similarly marked colleague from the institute, Jiří Kořalka, was interested in this possibility. I do not know anything about the background to the certainly difficult negotiations between director Schneider and the local party and other bodies, but their result was favorable for me in the

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<sup>185</sup> František Crkovský (b.1923), Czech historian.

<sup>186</sup> Miloš Drda (b.1946), Czech archaeologist.

<sup>187</sup> Rudolf Tecl (1950–2005), Czech historian and archivist.

future because Jiří Kořalka was first given a part-time job and soon afterwards, a full-time one. In 1975, director Schneider retired and his post was taken by Miloš Drda, who then carried the burden of the political responsibility for the museum staff.

Before long, the close cooperation between director Drda, his deputy Tecl, and the already internationally recognized expert on the general history of the nineteenth century Kořalka began to come to fruition. Jiří Kořalka realized the importance of the approaching hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the museum, prepared extensive documentation on its origin, and took on the editorial work on the jubilee anthology, which became the first volume of the yearbook *Husitský Tábor* (Hussite Tábor). This issue was a turning point because he himself published articles in it under his own name. Papers by two other historians expelled from the party appeared in the bibliography, namely his wife, Květa Kořalková,<sup>188</sup> and me. In our case, the authorship was only indicated by initials, but everyone knew who we were.

Part of the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the museum was the symposium “Hussite Tábor in Czech History,” in whose organization the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History participated in September 1978. The overt relationship with the Fourth *Symposium Pragense* suggested to those in the know in which direction the museum planned to head with its future conferences. The names of the lecturers, Amedeo Molnár, Jiří Kejř, and Miroslav Richter,<sup>189</sup> proved that scientific renown had the greatest weight in the selection. I could not figure on the program, but I had agreed with the Tábor organizers that I would be able to join with a prepared paper in the discussion. This did happen, and my postscript on the *History of Tábor* on the subsistence of the revolutionary community was issued in the second volume of *Hussite Tábor* from 1979. My name was listed in full in the paper, but not yet in the table of contents.

The competent party bodies, however, had to be informed of my participation. In all these cases, Miloš Drda risked his neck. When he asked at a party meeting sometime in 1978 whether he could employ

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<sup>188</sup> Květa Kořalková (1930–2008), Czech historian.

<sup>189</sup> Miroslav Richter (1932–2011), Czech archaeologist.

me, he was accused of “mucking up” the museum “with such individuals.” This bitter experience did not discourage him, though, and a year later he interceded for me again. This time, he succeeded.

Subsequently, with a certain embarrassment because they could only offer me a poorly paid post, director Drda and his close friend Tecl came to ask me if I would like to come and work with them. To my great surprise, I found out that I would have to be at the Tábors office in person at most two days a week and spend the rest carrying out my tasks in Prague’s archives and libraries. Only later I was told that this apparent privilege had the goal of reducing my negative influence on the museum staff to a minimum.

When both of my friends, Drda and Tecl, were asked years later what prompted them to “take responsibility” for the acceptance of two historians with very bad vetting profiles, myself and Kořalka, they answered almost identically: “We had healthy ambitions to stimulate the museum’s activities.” Miloš Drda was always pulling hot chestnuts from the fire, and today I feel more grateful for this than before. I spent one decade of my professional life with the Tábors Museum. It was pleasant to work with a young team where everyone was interested in meaningful work. Rudolf Tecl’s passion was to visit archives and amass unknown or at least unpublished writings on the history of Tábors and its district. He did not regret travelling anywhere if there was any hope of discovering some *Taboriensia*. However, he did not want to sort them out and analyze them, and he preferred to pass these *nova* to me. I think that this benefited our joint work on the *History of Tábors*.

**PR:** *Your story again illustrates the vital importance of specific people and their personal bravery. It also shows that after the first decade of its existence, normalization started to loosen its grip in some ways.*

**F5:** The first small cracks in the ideological armor began to appear gradually. In my employment at the Prague Transport Company, I had studied medieval history only in my free moments, but intensively. I had no idea how much spiritual energy it had cost me, until I found after returning to professional work how difficult it was to restore my normal work and routine. I was not lacking in ideas; I liked broaching



difficult topics—looking at and trying various paths to knowledge attracted me—but my handicaps could not be overcome. Instead of a foreign university, I had gone to the mines after gymnasium, so I was lacking active, fluent command of one of the world languages. When I then reached the peak of my creative forces, I spent years transporting Prague citizens in trams.

**PR:** *You are certainly right, but these handicaps do not seem to be reflected much in the list of your works from those years. It could be said you returned in 1980 with full strength.*

**FŠ:** As soon as my name could appear in 1980 in the first volume of the academic *Overview of Czech and Slovak History*, it was a sign that my anathema had been lifted. In January and April, colleagues from Ústí nad Labem invited me for two lectures in the local Theatre of Music. I received another invitation, this time from Slovak colleagues to give one of the keynote lectures at the international conference “Nationality Development of the Towns in Slovakia until 1918.” The conference took place in June 1981. It attracted notice that several times during my appearance I referred to the research of the signatory of Charter 77, Jaroslav Mezník, about whom Viennese television had said the day before that he was still in prison since his arrest on May 6.<sup>190</sup> Proscribed authors, such as František Graus, for instance, were often cited without being named.

**PR:** *This may seem trivial, but again it says a lot about the atmosphere of the period.*

**FŠ:** At that time I received a summons for an interrogation at the infamous headquarters of the State Security on Bartolomějská Street. The officer treated me as if I were an expert from whom he needed assistance. I certainly knew that Professor Aleksander Gieysztor,<sup>191</sup> as I was told, was a candidate for the post of the next president of the In-

190 Jaroslav Mezník mentions this episode in his memoirs. See Mezník, *Můj život za vlády komunistů*, 250–51.

191 On Aleksander Gieysztor, see p. 43, n. 48.

ternational Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS). Since he was to represent the entire “camp of peace and socialism,” it was necessary to consider his candidature carefully. I was not to worry about speaking openly, because my opinions would be just a square on the chessboard of opinions which are collected in similar surveys. I warmly recommended Gieysztor’s candidature and emphasized not only his professional renown and language skills, but also his diplomatic comportment. I then discovered with pleasure that at the fifteenth congress in Ceaușescu’s Bucharest in August 1980 he was really elected as president of the ICHS for the next five-year term of office. At that time, I received several foreign visits; some of them were old friends, others were visitors to the Tábor Museum. It did not occur to me then that my contacts with foreigners could interest State Security. I only thought of this later.

In June 1982, I received an invitation as a visiting professor at the Collège de France from Professor Jean Delumeau. I did not have a passport, but one would still have been useless without an exit visa. As I expected, the police visa department rejected my application, ostensibly for lack of foreign exchange, although I had not requested any. I had expected this, so I told Professor Delumeau without any special feeling of bitterness that I had to regretfully refuse his offer. Professor Delumeau, by then a member of the French Academy, took it, however, as an affront to the institution that he represented and consulted Quai d’Orsay about the whole affair.<sup>192</sup> After some time, he notified me that an intervention through diplomatic channels had been successful and he would send me an updated invitation in May 1983. This time, I was issued with a passport and visa without any prior interviews.

**PR:** *For this visiting professorship, you prepared your celebrated lectures on Hussitism as a historical anomaly, right?*

**FŠ:** Celebrated? I would not say that. I really conceived the four lectures as a series of treatises on the basic problems connected with the phe-

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<sup>192</sup> Quai d’Orsay: Parisian quay on the left bank of the Seine, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is headquartered.

nomenon of the Hussite Revolution as a historical anomaly. At the first lecture, Jacques Le Goff came to encourage me. He was so interested in the subject that he offered to print the text of the lecture in the revue *Annales*, but that did not happen in the end, because the entire series came out with a preface by Professor Delumeau in the editorial series *Essais et Conférences du Collège de France*. And since Bohemian Hussitism was included in 1985 in the compulsory examination materials for teacher candidates for French grammar and other secondary schools, my book had a singularly high print run of three thousand copies.

**PR:** *After your return, however, you started to have more serious problems with State Security.*

**FŠ:** I expected that immediately after returning I would be summoned to a station of State Security for interrogation, as was commonplace then. Nothing happened for a long time. Only at the Tábora Museum, where I was employed, the director indicated to me that Security had asked about me. Moreover, he warned me that a bug could be installed in the part of the library where I usually stayed for the night. From that time on, I did not say a single ideologically suspect word in those places, and instead of Radio Free Europe I listened to classical music at work. It was only several years later that I discovered that I had thus passed successfully the first examination in the selection of a State Security agent.

Dissidents usually knew not only the practices of State Security but also the defensive means against them. I belonged to the majority who considered this institution an all-powerful dark force, which was dangerous to annoy. Thus, for instance, I had no idea that a telephone summons from the headquarters on Bartolomějská Street, which did happen in the end, did not impose the obligation to appear. I moreover thought that the station was in the same building as the passport section. A rotund policeman in the porter's lodge laughed at me, saying: "Dear sir, this entire street belongs to us. Let that officer find you himself." Well, I went home. In the evening, an angry voice called on the telephone and gave me the house number where I was to announce myself at the appointed time. Thus began the hunt for my honor.

In Bartolomějská Street, I discovered that I was not in for an interrogation; they only wanted to know whether any emigrants had bothered me. They also asked me whether I would feel better if we continued the conversation in a café. I had no idea this was another test of my compliance. Immediately, during the first meeting in Café Luxor, I discovered that they were taping me and I had to be careful with every word. Like many before me and after me, I played a delaying game with the officers so as to not harm my son, who was preparing for his school-leaving examinations. It was clear that they knew of my contacts with the signatory of Charter 77, Mezník, because they asked most often about him. They knew much more; they threatened, for instance, that they would reveal my contacts with a married female friend.

Then after several interviews, which I considered to be interrogations, one of the officers gave me an official document with the pledge of a secret agent. I refused to sign, although I knew that doing so posed a threat to my children. State Security had chosen the right moment for extortion. My daughter had applied for disability pension, my son was about to sit his university entrance examinations, and I could easily lose my poorly paid position in the museum. I was told that not signing the obligation would have the result that my son would not get to university and would reproach me for ruining his life. Quite exceptionally for me, a fitting response occurred to me immediately: "What would he tell me if I signed the pledge?" Nevertheless, I remained on the list of candidates for secret collaboration, like many others, including President Václav Havel. Well, State Security may trouble innocent people even in the next world.

My refusal of cooperation with State Security surprisingly passed without consequences. I remember that at that time I debated the reasons for my little or non-existent political engagement with my French colleague Jean-Claude Schmitt,<sup>193</sup> who attended one of the dissident flat seminars. He understood me, although he would rather have seen in me a successor to our mutual friend Bronisław Geremek, one of the heroes and leaders of Polish Solidarity. French historians and intellectuals devoted significant attention to Czech dissent, and according to their capacities, they supported it.

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193 Jean-Claude Schmitt (b.1946), French medievalist.

Whoever looked over my notes from 1984 without knowing the context could get the false impression that I led the life of a normal scholar by profession. I published regularly and read papers at conferences, including conferences abroad. In September 1985, for example, I visited West Germany for the first time, in my fifties. At the same time, I managed to put my personal relations in order when I married again, the literary theoretician Dr. Hana Mirvaldová,<sup>194</sup> who had captivated me before with her excellent lectures in the medievalist section of the Unity of Classical Philologists.

After two years, my lectures at the Collège de France were published and included in a prestigious selection of the journal *Annales*. The attention devoted to my book in leading foreign journals, most of which went to the library of the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History, could not be ignored by Czech enviers. Moreover, my name figured on the program of a colloquium on the late medieval Church in the lands of Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, which was held in Rome at the end of January 1986 by the École Française de Rome. But I did not receive the promised exit visa, and I had to present my apologies literally at the last moment.

I assumed that the reason for the otherwise quite common refusal of the exit visa was the planned reception of the participants of the colloquium by Pope John Paul II. But soon, a smear campaign was orchestrated against me in Tábor. In the sixth issue from February 9, 1986, the Polish weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* carried an article by Stefan Swiezawski: “Jan Hus—heretyk czy prekursor Vaticanum secundum?”<sup>195</sup> It also came out on March 20 in a German translation in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, but under the more accurate title “Rehabilitation of Jan Hus?” A reference to my work in one of the notes in this article was enough for State Security to look for a Vatican agent in the Tábor Museum. My case was discussed by the party organizations of the large state enterprises in Tábor as an exemplary example of insufficient vigilance and watchfulness. In that, hateful rhetoric from the beginnings of the 1950s reappeared. I was compared to a slimy snake luxu-

<sup>194</sup> Hana Mirvaldová, neé Janatová (b.1946).

<sup>195</sup> Stefan Swiezawski, “Jan Hus—heretyk czy prekursor Vaticanum secundum?” [Jan Hus—Heretic or precursor of the Second Vatican Council?], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 40/6 (1986): 1–2.

riating in the museum and devouring workers' money. The affair quietened down in time, luckily; the major efforts were made by director Miloš Drda, and I could remain at the museum.

Still, some punishment had to be meted out. At the initiative of Jiří Kořalka, there was to be a colloquium on the European aspects of the life and work of Jan Hus, on September 22, 1986, at the study center of the Karl Marx House in Trier. A sharp protest against my announced paper was heard from the leadership of Prague's Institute of Czechoslovak and World History; my trip was cancelled by the district authorities, and instead of me, only my paper went to Trier.

In the meantime, the Czechoslovak state, being under constant pressure from abroad, allowed the husbands and wives of people whose parents or siblings lived abroad illegally—according to the laws then—to travel to the capitalist West for the purpose of visiting them. Since my wife's brother, a gynecologist living in the Federal Republic of Germany, rectified his legal relationship with the Czechoslovak state, my wife Hana and I were allowed to travel based on his invitation and naturally, at his expense.

With my wife's sympathy, we adapted our fourteen-day trip to the invitations I had received recently to conferences and lectures. We travelled on April 30 to Regensburg and from there to Munich, where I had been invited by the Göttingen professor Hartmut Boockmann<sup>196</sup> to a colloquium on the beginnings of the estate system in Prussia and the surrounding lands. The evening before the lecture, I visited Alexander Patschovsky and his wife, Sibylle, with whom I made lifelong friends. The colloquium was organized by a foundation called *Historisches Kolleg*, which provided four annual scholarships for German and foreign university professors and associate professors. Seven years later, it was to become my scholarly refuge for an entire year, but at the time of my first visit I could not even dream of that.

From Munich, my wife travelled to Prague, whereas I left for a brief lecture tour, which had been organized for me by Professor Hans-Bernd Harder<sup>197</sup> and Professor Hans Rothe.<sup>198</sup> In the Slavic seminars in Mar-

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196 Hartmut Boockmann (1934–98), German medievalist.

197 Hans-Bernd Harder (1934–96), German philologist.

198 Hans Rothe (b.1928), German philologist and slavist.

burg and Bonn I lectured on the antitheses of Bohemian culture in the Late Middle Ages. From there, I headed to Bochum, where a ceremonial congress on the sixtieth birthday of Professor Ferdinand Seibt took place on May 13, 1987. The next day, after a lecture at the university, where I expounded my conception of the Hussite Revolution as a historical anomaly, I travelled on a night express train to Munich and from there, via Nuremberg, to Prague.

**PR:** *Today, this itinerary seems like an example of a common scholarly operation. It is odd how unbelievably hard it must be, only a quarter of a century after the fall of the Eastern bloc, to pass on the unique experience that this scholarly excursion must have been for you.*

**FŠ:** Certainly, today, when it is possible not only to travel without limitations but also to find an immense amount of information that a historian needs for his work on the Internet, the story of isolation, which I could finally start to break through with these visits, must really sound unbelievable. By 1987, the changes began to be clearly visible. In July of that year, I made a trip to Budapest for a high-level conference on King and Emperor Sigismund of Luxembourg. Josef Macek and František Kavka were among the Czechs who attended the conference, which could also be considered as the dawn of a freer time. Another major foreign journey took place in June 1989, for a colloquium in Munich's Historisches Kolleg, which was organized by Jürgen Miethke.<sup>199</sup> On that occasion, the "American" brother of my wife gave me a personal computer, which was a revolutionary change. Thanks to that, I was prepared in advance for the tasks which I could not foresee in the summer of 1989.

**PR:** *By that time you had already finished your magnum opus, The Hussite Revolution.*

**FŠ:** The work was to be published by the Svoboda publishing house. It grew under my hands and the publishing house was pressing me, but I resisted and fulfilled my conception of a truly integral analysis, a bit in

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<sup>199</sup> Jürgen Miethke (b.1938), German historian.

the style but independent of the French concept of “total history” (*histoire totale*), which I had discussed with both Le Goff and Bronisław Geremek. Things went so far that I had to take unpaid leave at the museum for the first two months of 1989 in order to finish the book. The family budget suffered, but there was no other way.

**PR:** *We are again approaching one of the great historical moments of the twentieth century. How did you experience the fall of the Wall in the autumn of 1989?*

**FŠ:** In this context I have to mention, at least briefly, the medievalist “Roundtable.” Thanks to Pavel Spunar, who founded and ran the medievalist section at the Unity of Classical Philologists, our small community of medieval historians, including colleagues affected by political purges, used to meet and to talk in his cramped office in the book depository. Spunar’s “Roundtable” differed from other apartment seminars in that it was not a seminar in the actual sense of the word but a small learned society, a true *sodalitas eruditorum*, where a discussion of newly created studies and books took place.<sup>200</sup> The last meeting of the friendly circle of medievalists before the fall of the Iron Curtain took place on Friday, November 17, 1989, at Josef Macek’s flat. A lecture and scholarly discussion were followed by a debate on the political situation, as was the custom. The hope placed in Gorbachev had long been shattered; most of the historians present judged that the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia would survive the year 2000. Only the hostess disagreed, because she did not want to become reconciled to the idea that she would not breathe freely until the end of her life. I gallantly rushed to her support with the argument that in history there had already been many times of absolutely unexpected reversals. Two optimists versus ten pessimists; such was the exact ratio at the moment when the Prague students bravely faced the police cordon on Národní třída (National Avenue) and turned the wheel of history. Events are just easier to grasp than to foresee.

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<sup>200</sup> Briefly on the *Table ronde*, see Pavel Spunar, *Vlny vzpomínek: rodina—studia—akademie* [Waves of memories: Family—studies—university], Edice Pamět (Prague: Academia, 2010), 255–56; and Jiří Kejř, *Žil jsem ve středověku* [I lived in the Middle Ages], Edice Pamět (Prague: Academia, 2012), 142–35).



**PR:** *How did you perceive the November events?*

**FŠ:** After twenty-one years had passed since the upsurge of national emotions after the occupation of August 21, 1968, Czechs in November and December 1989 experienced a new intoxication from the national unification of thought. This time was full of joy and hope. It even seemed that everyone would forgive everything that they had done one another. “We are not like them” (that is, like the “normalizers”) was heard from all sides, but nobody asked where a million card-carrying communists had gone to—so well had they dispersed among the manifesting crowds or stayed at home.

Actors and singers were making their way through the crowd to the front, largely entertainers basking in glory under the collapsing regime. The “Sixty-eighters” looked resentfully at all the conciliatory events. They believed that expulsion from the party and living for years in injustice was enough for them to take the control of the state a third time. They were stopped from that by the masses of formerly silent independents joined by members of the two legal, albeit corrupted parties, the Christian Democrats and the National Socialists.

**PR:** *So your view of the whole event was rather skeptical if I understand it well. You expected that everything would remain as it had been?*

**FŠ:** Of course not. The rapid reversal surprised the majority of the society, which along with me wanted radical changes. There was no political base here with variants of the procedure prepared in advance for the end of the regime. This suited functionaries, members of the secret police, and people who amassed money and property. The change of the regime was a unique opportunity for everyone to play for high stakes. The mistakes made by the new political representations were extensive, but perhaps unavoidable under the circumstances. However, one thing stands out above all, at least in my eyes. A fundamental change of the state system took place without bloodshed.

**PR:** *How was the situation after November perceived among the community of historians?*

**FŠ:** I was called back to the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History by a strike committee in the middle of December 1989, at the instigation of my friend Dušan Třeštík, who had survived on academic soil as an independent. My return to the Institute was preceded by a stormy meeting of its former and current personnel on December 12, 1989, during which the mutual resentments of those attending escalated, which led to Josef Macek giving up his return to the seat of the director of the institute.

They thus waited for the standpoint of the informally created Historical Commission of the Civic Forum,<sup>201</sup> in which the reins were to be held by dissidents associated with the samizdat<sup>202</sup> historical studies. Concerning the next director of the Institute, their obvious candidate was Associate Professor Jaroslav Mezník, an eminent historian, a man of integrity, and a prisoner of conscience. Mezník remained employed until Christmas as a laborer in the mechanical workshop of Brno's Transport Company, and in his free time he devoted himself to the renewal of the Social Democratic Party. When in the middle of January 1990 he became a deputy in the Parliament of Nations of the Federal Assembly, he nominated me for the post of director of the institute. His nomination gained support in the Historical Commission.

I terminated my employment in Tábor on December 20, 1989, and immediately entered into employment at the Institute of Czechoslovak and World History. I led the first provisional editorial board of the *Czech Historical Journal* on January 4; five days later, at the session of the institute, I outlined the reform intentions and program direction for the institute, which was to be renamed the Institute of History.

The reestablishment of the Institute of History was entrusted to me by the presidium of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences on January 15, 1990. I became the interim director on February 1, based on my submitted strategy regarding the scholarly profile of the individual historical departments, which I introduced to the presidium of the Low-

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<sup>201</sup> The Civic Forum (Czech: *Občanské fórum*, OF) was a political movement in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, established during the so-called Velvet Revolution in 1989. The corresponding movement in Slovakia was called Public Against Violence.

<sup>202</sup> A system in the Soviet bloc by which government-suppressed literature was clandestinely printed and distributed, and a label for such literature.

er Chamber of the elected representatives of the academic institutes. From the middle of January, when Vilém Prečan appeared in Prague with the aim of establishing a new Institute of Contemporary History, I was in contact with him and with the Russianist Milan Švankmajer,<sup>203</sup> who was to work on the restoration of the Slavonic Institute.

**PR:** *The composition of the personnel of the humanities institutes was certainly problematic. Was there, in that period of rapid changes, any time to devise a meaningful strategy for the qualitative renewal of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences?*

**FŠ:** In the leadership of the academy there was a prevailing opinion that in order to reform the humanities institutes, it was not necessary to hold open competitions for all the researchers but only for the directors. At the same time, it was expected that the directors could cope with the so-called old structures, as the veterans of normalization and their toadies were called. The situation was absurd because the socialistic labor code was still in effect, which allowed employment to be legally terminated only as a result of a reorganization, which the leadership of the academy rejected as an option to resolve the problem. Moreover, the directors were to take back those former employees who had been politically persecuted.

**PR:** *From your description it follows that there was no economic-administrative strategy for the renewal of the humanities institutes. How did you yourself, but also the other directors, in the end manage to square the circle—not to fire anyone and to hire those who had been fired? Was there enough money for that?*

**FŠ:** A wait-and-see period began then. Even those who had been the main support of normalization were waiting to see what would happen. As far as I remember, only one of them resigned by himself, because he was of retirement age and expected to be handed back a fortune in restitutions. A bizarre situation arose because the former rulers of the in-

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<sup>203</sup> Milan Švankmajer (1928–2003), Czech historian.

stitute acted as if nothing had happened. This was particularly true of the former director, who had, *inter alia*, thrown me out of the normalized institute. I called him in, told him that he had the advantage of retirement age and that he had to realize what situation he was in. If he left by himself, I would guarantee him a honorable exit. He took fourteen days to think it over. I heard that he was defiant, but since the other normalizers of retirement age decided to leave, he also submitted his resignation. It was at the last moment because similar functionaries of the old regime had already started to raise their heads and utilize the democratic regime for judicial or other delays of their departure.

In the end, I did not have any big problems with the former rehabilitated colleagues, because some went over to Prečan's Institute of Contemporary History while others, for various reasons, were not interested in returning. In time, several vacancies were created for new researchers, who then contributed significantly to raising the standard of the institute's research. A case in point was Noemi Rejchrtová, a student of Amedeo Molnár.

Other colleagues, particularly those whom I had wanted to lean on, left for universities. I was especially unhappy about the departure of Jaroslav Mezník, head of the Brno branch of the Institute of History, who had been appointed professor of general history at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University. Luckily, another Brno associate professor and future full professor, Jaroslav Marek, decided to remain permanent staffer at the academy. Out of character, Dušan Třeštík accepted the responsible mission of president of the institute's scholarly council, so I could rely on colleagues whom I entirely trusted in serious decisions. However, the leading personalities of Czech medieval studies of the pre-normalization period could no longer intervene in the renewal of the Institute of History. Just before and after the revolution, František Graus, Robert Kalivoda, and Amedeo Molnár died. The study of Hussitism suffered a heavy blow when, in December 1991, the first director of the institute, Josef Macek, suddenly died.

In the first weeks after November 1989, people who tried to conceal their questionable past with exaggerated radical activities or followed their own profit-seeking aims occasionally forced their way into the governing bodies of state and academic institutions. A number of peo-

ple in their forties at academic institutes became unbalanced. That applied in particular to those who had had a promising career ahead of them under the old regime. They never knew any other regime than socialism. Although most were not hard-core Marxists, they bore the burden of linguistic, conceptual, and other stereotypes, which was not easy to remove at their age. Some found a way out in neo-positivism, others in Austro-nostalgia.

**PR:** *How successful was the reestablishment of broken contacts with foreign medieval scholars, which had begun so promisingly in the 1960s? How would you evaluate the path that foreign medieval scholars would take from that time on and the tasks which stood before Czech humanities in this regard?*

**FŠ:** Havel's Velvet Revolution attracted a rapt attention in the world. Not only exiles but also historians of various nationalities and specializations headed to Prague.

I cannot name here all of the foreign guests whose lectures or discussions I chaired. Of the medievalists, I will mention only Alexander Patschovsky, Jörg Hoensch,<sup>204</sup> Howard Kaminsky, Romulo Cegna,<sup>205</sup> Jerzy B. Korolec, Peter Johanek,<sup>206</sup> and János M. Bak.<sup>207</sup> A special welcome was extended to Ferdinand Seibt, the representative of Munich's Collegium Carolinum, on May 22, 1990. The cooperation of the Institute of History with the French Center for Research in the Social Sciences (CEFRES) had an entirely special form. The first contact with the Czech studies specialist Marie-Elizabeth Ducreux,<sup>208</sup> who, in 1991, was to become the first director of this cultural institution of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was established as early as March 2, 1990. In the subsequent meetings, I reserved with the consent of the academy's governing body several rooms for CEFRES on the second floor of the Emauzy Monastery, where the Institute of his-

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204 Jörg K. Hoensch (1935–2001), German historian.

205 Romolo Cegna (b.1925), Italian historian.

206 Peter Johanek (b.1937), German historian.

207 János M. Bak (b.1929), Hungarian medievalist.

208 Marie-Elizabeth Ducreux (b.1950), French historian.

tory was headquartered at that time. Thus, this very beneficial institution acquired its Prague center for the long term.

The interest of foreign countries in the situation in the country that had gotten rid of a one-party government in a peaceful way was also reflected in sincere efforts to help the hard-hit humanities. Western states, particularly the neighboring Federal Republic of Germany, sent scholarships, support funds, and book gifts to us as a matter of priority. As the director of the Institute of History, I had often had an opportunity to send researchers and students on foreign study visits. In the first period, I even had to make sure that the majority of our personnel were not abroad. A great help for the institute and myself was a great appreciation in the form of the Max Planck Research Award, which I received along with the Constance professor Alexander Patschovsky. Most of the cash from this award was used, thanks to his understanding, to purchase computers, which facilitated the advent of the electronic age at the Institute of History.

The situation at the Institute of History became complicated when the Catholic Church included the Emauzy Monastery among its restitution demands. I regretted the loss of the Emauzy Monastery, whose premises were ideal for academic purposes. But in principle, I approved of restitution, and not only because my siblings and I regained my grandfather's devalued estate. The ecclesiastical administration offered the institute an acceptable rental contract, which helped the institute until it could find a new home. The institute moved to a new building in Prosek in 1994.

**PR:** *You have already mentioned that you considered new textbooks for the teaching of history as a primary task. It was necessary to write them really quickly—were there sources for something like that at all in Czech historiography then?*

**FŠ:** The work on the two-volume textbook entitled *Czech and Czechoslovak History* dragged on for two years.<sup>209</sup> The conceptual and editori-

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<sup>209</sup> In the meantime, the institute organized several seminars for teachers of history at elementary and high schools or participated in them.

al work on the book was done by Jaroslav Marek. For the third and fourth chapters, dealing with the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, I proposed a new periodization based on my *Hussite Revolution*. In the new conception, the turning point between the Hussite and following epochs of Czech history was the conclusion of a religious peace in Kutná Hora in 1485, with which the era of the estates' monarchy began, and not the defeat of the field armies in the Battle of Lipany in 1434.

The completion of the second volume was slightly delayed because none of the authors we addressed wanted to take on the interpretation of the historical period from August 1968 to November 1989. At the last moment—only a few days were left to the submission of the manuscript—I decided to write the chapter myself. After all, I was a historian and had lived through those twenty years myself. I closed my eyes and tried to separate in my head the important from the unimportant. I then awaited the verdict of Jaroslav Marek, trembling. He told me that he had given my text to his wife to read. After reading the chapter she apparently said: “Yes, that is how we experienced it.”<sup>210</sup> I could not have gotten any greater satisfaction. The poor looking teaching texts were published in a print run of forty thousand copies, with no right to royalties. I believe that they served their purpose at that time, although they could not replace a real textbook.

**PR:** *The first half of the 1990s was a period of revolutionary social changes. Which changes in Czech science do you consider to be most important? How would you evaluate their long-term impact today?*

**FŠ:** The establishment of the Grant Agency of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in October 1990 was a new phase in the financing of research in sciences and humanities. The initiative was seized by a distinguished physical chemist from Berlin's Freie Universität, Jaroslav Koutecký, after being authorized by the presidium of the academy.<sup>211</sup> He chose as his vice-presidents the theoretical physicist Bedřich

<sup>210</sup> See Jaroslav Marek, ed., *České a československé dějiny* [Czech and Czechoslovak history], vol. 2, *Od roku 1790 do současnosti* [From 1790 to the present] (Prague: Fortuna, 1991), 111–19.

<sup>211</sup> Jaroslav Koutecký (1922–2005), Czech physical chemist.

Velický<sup>212</sup> and physical chemist Zdeněk Herman.<sup>213</sup> As the humanities and social sciences were also to have their representation, I was the third vice-president for these disciplines. In this regard I was a complete beginner, so I had to find my bearings quickly.

Following the example of the Grant Agency of the academy, other agencies were created, including the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, the funds for these agencies came from the budget of the existing institutions, and the newly created Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic suffered greatly from this. With the benefit of hindsight, I dare to say that precisely for the disciplines that I represented, the Grant Agency within the Academy of Sciences was not a good solution. If the director with the scientific council could assign research and editorial tasks competently before, taking into consideration the capabilities of university institutes or departments, now external commissions that were not directly responsible for the academic establishments more and more decided successful projects.

The first serious financial problems of the Academy of Sciences surfaced immediately after the Velvet Revolution. Universities and higher education establishments started a rather unscrupulous campaign against the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences as a creation of the Stalinist scientific policy. Whereas the leadership of the academy, led by Otto Wichterle and Rudolf Zahradník,<sup>214</sup> set up a rigorous economic regime and formulated strict quality criteria for every employee, the universities had hardly changed from the previous period in terms of staffing or otherwise. I already felt this pressure at the first council of the government for science and research, in which Rudolf Zahradník and I represented the academy. More than once, those who had lived unmolested through the normalization process with their university careers, were the first to abolish the Academy of Sciences. I experienced several such attacks in which the academy would lose a portion of its budget. First, it had to shrink by a third, which was acceptable and beneficial, then it had to give up part of its budget in favor of the

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<sup>212</sup> Bedřich Velický (b.1938), Czech physicist.

<sup>213</sup> Zdeněk Herman (b.1934), Czech physical chemist.

<sup>214</sup> Rudolf Zahradník (b.1928), chemist, president of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 1993–2001.



Grant Agency, which was open to the entire scientific community. At the same time, it was taken for granted that the academy would contribute to all kinds of scientific and scholarly societies from its budget.

The majority of the research centers of the Academy of Sciences justified their existence and some of them reported excellent results. I mean in particular the institutes of mathematics, theoretical physics, chemistry, and natural sciences, in which English is the *lingua franca*, and which can be evaluated by generally accepted methods. The situation is somewhat different for the humanities and social sciences. The oldest of these institutes, which were created in Bohemia as early as in the 1920s, have not lost to this day their statutory functions in the protection, preservation, and accessibility of the national cultural heritage.

The other establishments were offered a chance to commit themselves more vigorously to university instruction, which corresponded to the demands of a modern society in which access to higher education has to be much more open than it had been during the communist regime, following the example of the Western educational systems. When in 2005 I took up the post of president of the Scientific Council for the second time, I appeared with an informal program for the transformation of the Academy of Sciences into an academic research university. This would lead to the desirable marriage of science with instruction and the brick and mortar universities would have to do their utmost to defend their reputation.

My plan received strong support particularly from the influential group of the institutes specializing in chemistry, but, on the other hand, the humanities institutes unfortunately showed no interest. And since, in experts' opinions, the universities would not allow a transformation of the academy for fear of competition, which was to appear in a countless number of private higher education establishments, I abandoned the idea of the academic research university and focused my efforts concerning university education on the work in the Accreditation Commission of the government of the Czech Republic, of which I was a member from 1998 to 2006.

**PR:** *Concerning the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, it might be worthwhile to go on a short excursion into history.*

**FŠ:** Until the communist putsch in 1948, there were two learned societies with a high professional reputation in Bohemia and Moravia, namely the Royal Bohemian Society of Sciences, founded in 1784, and the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, which was created in 1890 thanks to the patron Josef Hlávka. Whereas the first society associated Czechs and native Germans, the second had a distinctly nationalist character. Both of these societies were closed in 1952 and their place was taken by the newly established Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, which was a learned society of the older type and, at the same time, the center of the scientific and research institutes organized according to the Soviet model.

After the creation of the independent Czech Republic on January 1, 1993, the circle of Otto Wichterle and Rudolf Zahradník considered the establishment of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic as successor of the two learned societies, while the network of scientific institutes of the former Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was to be restructured according to the model of the German Max Planck Gesellschaft or the French Centre National de Recherche Scientifique. Unfortunately, this plan did not enlist enough support.

**PR:** *In that time you were involved with several scholarly organisations.*

**FŠ:** I was not one of the founding members of the newly founded Learned Society of the Czech Republic,<sup>215</sup> but it was a great honor when I was elected as a member in 1995. After a certain hesitation caused by my workload I accepted a nomination in 1994 as a member of the administration of the Josef, Marie, and Zdeňka Hlávka Foundation, in which I have been serving to this day. Many more obligations came from my eight-year membership on the Accreditation Commission. When I became a member in 1998, the network of Czech higher education institutions was already so dense that every major town in Bohemia and Moravia had at least a detached faculty. The number of private higher education establishments increased in the period of my

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<sup>215</sup> The Learned Society of the Czech Republic was founded in 1994 as a follow-up to the Royal Bohemian Society of Sciences and to the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Arts, which had been closed in 1952.

service in the Accreditation Commission, but they were always specialized in the study of economics, administration, and finance. Three other members of the commission and I had the responsibility for the establishment of new faculties of arts at regional universities.

The network of higher education institutions teaching history before November 1989 had included, in addition to the three universities of Prague, Brno, and Olomouc, five independent teachers' training colleges in České Budějovice, Plzeň, Ústí nad Labem, Hradec Králové, and Ostrava. After 1989, these training colleges became the foundation from which regional universities grew. Despite the deep social changes and new needs of higher educational instruction, the teachers' training colleges were of a low professional standard and hampered the creation of new institutes of history and other branches, from which the new faculties of arts were to grow. When the reshaping of teachers' training colleges proved impossible, I tended towards the accreditation of new faculties of arts, even at the cost of insufficient breadth of the study program offered by them. My colleagues and I worked on the assumption that these embryonic faculties would create in time more disciplines. This did happen, and with hindsight it has been shown that this somewhat risky reliance on young, efficient, and promising teachers of a wide range of historical sciences has paid off.

My work at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, which I started in the winter term of 1990–91 as associate professor, was less successful. Every year I took on more tasks, especially in master's and later doctoral studies. For six years, starting in 1993, I ran a seminar on Czech medieval history. I could not believe in what cramped quarters the instruction was given. By then the faculty was rife with a number of useless disciplines, and because it had not, unlike the academy, undergone a deep revitalization in the form of necessary personnel changes, the entire 1990s were marked by an unnerving stagnation.

**PR:** *Despite that you were able to train a new scholarly generation even under these conditions.*

**FŠ:** These were largely students who themselves found their way to me. They were very capable and recompensed me for the disappointment

caused by the impossibility of achieving system-wide changes. Since directors of institutes can only hold their position two times in a row, according to the statutes of the Academy of Sciences, I faced the question in 1998 of whether I should move back to my study room, as I was on the brink of retirement age. Although it is common at the academy that directors keep a leading position after the end of their term of office at the institute, I did not choose this option. Things were similar in the faculty. For some time I had been toying with the idea of founding a center for the training of doctoral candidates with a wider range of medieval disciplines, following the proven method of the German study and scientific program known under the name *Graduiertenkolleg* (graduate's college). I talked about this possibility with my friend Vilém Herold,<sup>216</sup> then vice-president of the Academy of Sciences for the humanities and social sciences, who supported my initiative within the bounds of possibility. Well, since I had the sympathy of the rector of Charles University, Karel Malý,<sup>217</sup> with whom I had cooperated for a long time, the newly founded Center for Medieval Studies became a joint establishment of the Academy of Sciences and Charles University in 1998 and, gradually, the service base for doctoral medieval studies in the Czech Republic.

**PR:** *Did you have enough time for your own scholarly work with all these obligations?*

**FŠ:** In my opinion, a scholar's professional path includes not only own research but also service to the discipline, including the training of young scholars. Therefore, I have scarcely mentioned my own research so far in my memories of the period after November 1989, when I again had, after more than twenty years, the possibility of speaking freely. Also, previously unthinkable possibilities opened up for me in this direction. First of all, I mean research and other journeys abroad. Thanks to the possibility of studying abroad, including, for instance, an annual scholarship at Munich's Historisches Kolleg in 1994–95,

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<sup>216</sup> Vilém Herold (1933–2012), Czech historian.

<sup>217</sup> Karel Malý (b.1930), jurist, rector of Charles University of Prague, 1994–1999.

I could make up for the losses of past years and fill at least some of the lacunae in my knowledge. In a short while, I became one of those thousands of scholars of the Western democratic world, whose curriculum vitae reflects their professional career and not the paradoxes and absurdities of the existence of a scholar in an unfree society.

What is vital to a scholar is the theme which he is living through now. At my age I can no longer conceive major projects; I can no longer keep track of the increasing number of academic publications. The time has come to learn from my own students and successors. It is and will be up to them to develop the knowledge of the past in the rapidly changing present. I used to believe that my life trials and experiences made the learning of history easier. This was true to a certain extent. There are, however, many historians who in the undisturbed havens of their offices create works with amazingly deep understanding of historical twists and turns and human decisions. If I am to look back at my professional life, I have to admit that I could have done more. In my youth I should have spent time abroad, not in the mines and barracks, then in my productive age in the professorial chair and not behind the dashboard of a tram. But then it would not have been the life fate chose for me to live.

**PR:** *You claim that you could have done more if your life and social events had not limited or hampered you in these key life periods for professional maturation. I think also a number of your students and coworkers are of the opinion that your extensive research, publications, and pedagogical activity are proof against your claim. Your life and all of its events did not limit you, although in some way they formed you and helped you to find a position for the interpretation of historical events. And the issues of methodology, interpretation of historical events, and formulation of a personal historical narrative are areas which we perhaps understand better and more precisely now, in connection with your biographical chronology.*

**FŠ:** I admit that this had an influence on my work. Since my youth I had striven for a scholarly character of historiography. Therefore, at the time of the dominance of Marxist ideology, I placed an emphasis on

critical analysis, following the proven rules of the auxiliary historical sciences. But, after all, the personality of a historian is equally projected in the final work, sometimes more, sometimes less. If you assign a topic to three people, each one will treat it a bit differently. It depends on how they see the world. If I limit myself to my own introspection, I have to mention a manifest empathy for the burgher class and its social environment, which I see as the driving force in the shaping of modern European civilization. In my case, from this stems also a certain underestimation of the importance of the nobility, although its role was indisputable until the great Renaissance flowering of urban communities. I say this with hesitation, because the older I get the more I realize the correlation of historical processes, the transformations of values, and the fading of contours. The larger a slice of history you examine, the bigger is the scene you consider, and the more the details of the lives of concrete individuals and entities escape you.

Although I have tried to approach the Bohemian Middle Ages through the prism of general history, I cannot deny my Czech parochialism, given to me by my life and my possibilities. I remained cloistered in Bohemia from my youth; I did not have the opportunity to travel in my youth and perfectly master at least one of the world languages. We might be sitting somewhere else if I could have used the scholarships I received from the French government in 1958. I have already mentioned the obstacles to emigration. Subjective dispositions also played a role here. Someone chooses emigration more easily; another cannot live without Czech ponds, metaphorically and literally speaking.

I cannot pass over social consciousness, either. I come from a relatively well-situated family living in a small town. Precisely because of this I already perceived as a boy that some classmates lived in different circumstances. I would have preferred us to have been all the same. To this day, the fates of poor families move me, but the tragic end of the experiment with communist egalitarianism has removed all remnants of illusions, and I am not the only example of this. How was this reflected in my conception of the Hussite Revolution? The opponents of revolutionary changes often ignore the dissatisfaction, desires, and legitimate demands of a class struggling for change. Apologists defend-

ing revolutions overlook their negative consequences. I strove for a comprehensive analysis of the revolutionary cycle, which was also reflected in some of the evaluative judgements of a subjective nature.

If I stand on the middle left of the political spectrum, this does not mean that I come across in this way in my view of the history of the Middle Ages. In fact, my civic choice is usually a choice between a lesser and a greater evil. Long-term examination of the Late Middle Ages has blunted my original starting points, which I mentioned in connection with urban civilization. The deeper I explored medieval life and customs, the better I understood the motives, interests, and aims of the feuding sides. Many years ago, I came to a point that I called the “heat death of a historian.” I borrowed the term from astrophysics to indicate that from the understanding of everything, although only apparent and relative, it is a small step to inertia, a state when a historian can only state how things came to pass and ended. Is it not too little? In my youth, my answer would have been different from the present one.

A historian can never please all of his readers. This sometimes comes into play even more in the question of the religious view of history. I would not dare to speak about the complex meanders of medieval faith if I had not been forced to that by the study of Hussitism.

**PR:** *Concerning that: What do you think about Jan Hus and his quest?*

**FŠ:** The six hundredth anniversary of the death of Hus at the stake forced me to address the question whether I should at my age still try to capture the life and work of this reformer. A large monograph was already out of the question. I selected a medium-size format, the most difficult in my eyes, because the author cannot go into details and at the same time has to meet the demands for reliability and verifiability of the facts presented. Moreover, I strove for a certain attractiveness for the readers to face up the demeaning caricatures of Hus’s person, which appear from time to time in the mass media.

Jan Hus is one of the most important personalities of Czech history. To write his biography is always an ambitious enterprise, because our hands are tied. It is always a struggle with this figure. For me, this

struggle came at a moment when I did not feel the urge to provide my own perception of the past with some higher value. I did not see these values anymore, and therefore I was not able to put more emphasis on Hus's self-sacrifice.

**PR:** *For me, Jan Hus is really the only figure in Czech history against which a moral dimension of our own behavior can be benchmarked. In his case, it was his own decision: he was given a choice by the Council, and what he chose was a moral legacy to which we can relate. Therefore, Hus is still alive.*

**FŠ:** I do not know if I would have the courage to follow Hus all the way through. On the other hand, I can imagine me doing that. But I am not sure about that.

**PR:** *You once told me that Jerome of Prague, who had so many doubts that he recanted his and Hus's "heretical" teachings, was closer to you. Is that the reason?*

**FŠ:** Only partially. Jerome did not consider his opponents as authorities whom he should respect. For a long time, he managed to avoid Church punishment by timely escapes from hot spots. He managed this after his scandalous disputations in Paris, Heidelberg, and Cologne. Also, during his trial in Vienna in 1410 he reneged on his promise and fled the city. He also tried this in Constance, where he originally appeared to help his friend Hus. After he was thrown into a dungeon he did not worry about his future historical reputation and disavowed the condemned articles of Hus's or, rather, Wycliffe's teachings. Since his enemies were not deceived by this, Jerome acquitted of himself just as bravely as Hus and, according to a laudatory letter from the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, ended his life "like a real philosopher from the dynasty of the great Stoics." Jerome, however, has a place of his own in the Czech pantheon. He was not merely "the other." On the contrary, in Czech spiritual history, this nonconforming intellectual was the first philosopher in the true sense of the word. For him, philosophy was not a stepping stone to theology or an ecclesiastical career, but an independent discipline dealing with the macrocosm and microcosm and enjoying full rights.



**PR:** *Now, I would like to return to one of your main works, The Hussite Revolution. In the biographical part of your narration, you indicated that the selection of this topic, which became a kind of your “life’s” topic, actually was not a personal choice at all.*

**FŠ:** To be honest, I never became attached to Hussitism. In my youth I had wanted to study the Renaissance; I was always reading something about it, and I knew the history of Florence almost better than the history of Prague. Joining the Institute of History brought me existential security, which I was grateful for. While a change of research focus was related to that, Hussitism was a complex topic which I could best explore in Bohemia, whereas the study of the Renaissance in Italy was out of the question for me. I also understood with a sixth sense that Hussitism is one of the few, if not only, topics of early Czech history that is truly an integral component of European general history. Take any textbook on the Middle Ages, in any country, and you will certainly find mention of Hus or Hussitism in it.

In my work, I followed those researchers who believed that Hussitism anticipated the European Reformation. Even Josef Macek later mooted this idea when he disregarded the rigid rules of historical materialism. In this he was most opposed by the East German orthodox Marxists, especially in the disputes on whether Hussitism was a revolution or only a revolutionary movement. According to them, Hussitism was not a revolution, because that was only the German Peasants’ War, according to Friedrich Engels. Josef Macek made concessions to them in this regard, but not Robert Kalivoda, whose book on Hussite ideology was one of the starting points in my own studies.

When you study revolutionary processes, you cannot ignore Marxist approaches. Whoever has become thoroughly acquainted with my tetralogy on the Hussite Revolution must have discovered that I do not argue against Marxism—I could not afford to do that—but against the mistakes of Marxist historiography. However, in the Czech edition, a certain patina remained in some evaluative judgments, which lost their topicality after November 1989. By that, I mean particularly those places where I twist the knife in the wounds of the revolutionary actors.

**PR:** *In the German translation of The Hussite Revolution, which came out in an edition by Alexander Patschovsky in 2002,<sup>218</sup> this character of your Hussite Revolution is already somewhat suppressed.*

**FŠ:** Alexander Patschovsky devoted exceptional care to my *Hussite Revolution* at the expense of his own research. He asked serious and important questions all the time, which forced me to express myself more precisely and less figuratively. Do not forget that my work was created at a diametrically different time and in a different country. You know very well from your own experience that when you formulate something for, let us say, an American journal, you have to avoid some things, starting with terminology and ending with concepts that mean nothing to foreign readers. So you adjust to them.

**PR:** *This is a problem of separate scholarly discourses. It is probably important to try to create a new type of scholarly discourse, which overcomes the national and language barriers and professional specialization. Otherwise, soon we will not have anyone to write for in today's globalized world. And I am speaking only about the academic community and not about non-historian readers.*

**FŠ:** Naturally, that is a very serious question, which I also ask myself. After all, who would not like to address a wider circle of people than the readers of academic publications? However, so many books come out that we are not able to read them all. We put them on the shelves and often search in them only according to an index, unless we prefer the Internet.

**PR:** *Certainly, not only you but every one of us must in essence rack our brains over how to write our books so that they go beyond that closest circle of interested readers.*

**FŠ:** I always made sure that my scholarly texts had a certain attraction for the readers. Thanks to my grammar school instruction in Latin,

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<sup>218</sup> German edition: František Šmahel, *Die Hussitische Revolution* (The Hussite Revolution), ed. Alexander Patschovsky, 3 vols, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Schriften 43 (Hannover: Hahn, 2002).

long sentences are not a problem for me. Despite that, I later learned from the reading of Hemingway and his short, choppy sentences. It then took quite a lot of time before it was clear to me what a purely academic text requires. In the meantime, there were generational shifts, and I had to reconsider my linguistic means again. This happened to me for the last time when I was working on my book about the life and work of Jan Hus.

**PR:** *Maybe what bothers us is the feeling that we do not understand the world totally.*

**FŠ:** I admit that this is true in my case. I am one of the historians who tries to build historical segments or, more precisely, to reconstruct them in all their complexity. I felt troubled more than once when I did not manage to verify all of the “ideas.” By contrast, I was pleased when I was able to find the right thread in the tangled ball of wool. As soon as it gets stuck somewhere, something gets in the way of the selected method or model and another path must be sought. Everyone uses a different method; every historian has a different character, a different approach, and also, different talents and abilities. If I were to say briefly what a “talent for history” is, then I would put the emphasis on asking questions.

**PR:** *What is the best way to educate a historian and who should do it?*

**FŠ:** I would say that, in the case of the instruction of historians, it is a matter of a lucky chance that allows them to meet good and helpful teachers during their studies. This should happen immediately, in the first year, in the introductory seminars, which should be guided by experienced professors and not by assistants. Already during that time, the students should consider the idea of history as scholarship and the demands that they will have to meet. The role of the teacher in conducting a seminar or dissertation is no less important. I made sure, inter alia, that students knew how to use the footnote system and learned to write a meaningful and linguistically correct text. Not only a beginning journalist but also a historian should know that the

very first sentence often decides whether one has gripped the reader's attention.

Students should also make sure as soon as possible whether their capabilities are really sufficient for the discipline they have picked to be able to quickly find another job. The obligation of the teacher is to reprimand sluggish or incapable students in time. The competition in the field is enormous nowadays, and existential uncertainty awaits even many successful doctoral graduates.

**PR:** *For the purposes of comparison, could you make another brief excursion into history and describe what it looked like at the university in the 1960s, which was a shaping time for Czech historiography and Czech medieval studies?*

**FŠ:** The difference is that there were fewer undergraduates, I mean those who wanted to devote themselves to research. I would almost say that this was considered an eccentricity. The majority of my colleagues tried to find a position in secondary schools, archives, or museums. In spite of this, if I look back, a number of my professional peers made their mark in historical research with brilliance. I will not name them lest I forget anyone. Their works, despite the limitations and possibilities of the period, mean a real contribution, and to this day the majority of them are a part of living study.

**PR:** *How were the students doing then with knowledge of languages? For example, very few people from my generation knew foreign languages at the beginning of the 1990s.*

**FŠ:** This was true even earlier. Since I specialized in humanism and the Renaissance, command of three or four languages was necessary. Unfortunately, it was only a reading knowledge. In the decisive years of my study, I did not have the opportunity to master actively any foreign language. I regret this to this day.

**PR:** *Let us return to today's young generation of historians, who will be the future of this research discipline in the next decades. We have both spoken*

*critically here about the problem of the quality or rather lack of quality of the education of the scholarly capacities in the humanities. How do you see the future of historiography?*

**FŠ:** Today's young researchers have to come to the fore with their work as soon as they can. When that does not happen in the critical period of around thirty to thirty-five years of age, it is usually too late. I see more talented, hardworking, and linguistically equipped young colleagues around me than the posts open to them for long-term employment. I am sometimes sad in my heart of hearts when I see the incessant struggle for grants that is in store for them.

**PR:** *To conclude our interview, I would like to return to 2013, when you became a laureate of the National Prize of the Czech Government “Česká hlava” (Czech Head). The appeal you made in the acceptance speech at the awards ceremony is now highly topical.*

**FŠ:** On these occasions, it is a tradition to thank all who have helped you, particularly those close to you. I did so, and additionally, in the conclusion, I added a few brief sentences, which were intended for the audience in the hall and on the TV screens: “Let’s not foul our own history. Let’s be more mindful of the common good and think, even though thinking is for free.”

I borrowed the last phrase from a television discussion during the Prague Spring in 1968, when the philosopher Ivan Sviták<sup>219</sup> did not say a word during the stormy discussion, and only in the conclusion, when the camera panned on him, said: “Think, people—thinking is for free.” I only shifted the meaning of this statement a little to highlight the important thing brought about by the new era: the value of free thought, which cannot be measured in the amount of money you make.

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<sup>219</sup> Ivan Sviták (1925–94), Czech philosopher, one of the prominent proponents of Marxist humanism.



## Introducing

# Herwig Wolfram

When I studied history at the University of Vienna in the 1970s, my high hopes were soon disappointed. Most academic teachers seemed somehow locked into their small worlds of specialized scholarship, more oriented towards what they regarded as the more glorious past of their discipline than what was happening in their field at the time. Even very erudite professors whose work displayed high scholarly standards were scarcely capable of stimulating their students' interest in their subject. The shadows of a troubled past—two catastrophic wars, civil strife, a fascist and a Nazi regime—still loomed large over the generation of our professors. History, for most of them, was very remote from present concerns.

Herwig Wolfram was among the few who were noticeably different. Lively, outgoing, witty, and always full of ideas, he could transmit his fascination with the subject. He was not a scholar in a secluded niche, but someone who moved in and out of the academic world with great ease and to the benefit of both worlds. As a student, he had worked as a skiing instructor and hitchhiked across Europe. As emerges from the interview, he had always been outspoken in the critique of any nationalist ideology, and in particular Nazism. There were lingering tendencies in Austrian postwar society to glorify the Nazi past, or—more frequently—to gloss over the ignominious role many Austrians had played in the Nazi regime. The official political position was that Austria had been the first victim of Hitler's expansionist policy, and that embarrassing details about this dark chapter in Austrian history were better left untouched. By the time I was a student, some outspoken critics of such politics of oblivion had emerged at the history

department, such as Erika Weinzierl and Gerald Stourzh. Yet the atmosphere was still dominated by scholars who moved cautiously within the safe zone of very specialized scholarly concerns. For the most part, they carefully avoided contextualizing their research within contemporary social and political issues.

Herwig Wolfram stood out in accepting this challenge in his research. He had started with philologically based studies of medieval political discourse—*fortuna, splendor imperii*, rulers' titles—which had been regarded as too philological by most historians and too historical by most philologists. As he moved forward to research on the early medieval kingdoms, he faced the challenge of the ideological load of the topic. Study of the “fall of Rome,” the “Germanic” peoples, and the migration period had been a key concern of German nationalism and a highly divisive topic on the European scale: What Germans had regarded as the noble exploits of Germanic warriors, who had brushed away a decadent Roman civilization, had appeared to most of the French or Italians as a destructive invasion by savage barbarians. Building on the work of Reinhard Wenskus, but going beyond it in many respects, Wolfram drew a nuanced picture of the integration of barbarians in the late Roman world and the process of ethnogenesis in which they became distinguishable political actors. Rather than presenting a systematic theoretical model, Wolfram exemplified his approach in a masterful study of the Goths (1979) framed as a “historical ethnography.” His key point was that barbarian peoples had not arrived on Roman territory as stable ethnic units, but that they had only really emerged in their kingdoms. Their ethnogenesis was a very complex and certainly not teleological process. Not actual shared descent, as generations of nationally oriented historians had believed, but only a notion of common origins had been at the basis of their affiliation: a subjective sense of allegiance to an ethnic group, mediated by origin legends and traditional norms.

Wolfram was keenly aware of the ideological implications of this work and used to say that, as an early medieval historian, he was actually addressing issues of contemporary history. Later, when a group of historians around Walter Goffart argued that Wolfram had tried to preserve the idea of a deep identity of ancient and modern Germans by



replacing the notion of biological continuity of the Germanic people with a focus on “ethnic” traditions, he was deeply offended by this complete misrepresentation of his approach. He had never regarded himself or the Austrians in general as Germans. He placed himself in a Viennese tradition of cosmopolitanism, without obliterating the contradictory character of an Austrian identity built on but also in a sense subverted by its former imperial frame. Austria had been one of the few European nations which had not developed its own nationalism; and the Austrians had paid dearly for this fateful attachment to German nationalism. In that sense, postwar Vienna had been a good place for developing critical approaches towards all sorts of national appropriations of history, but it was certainly not an environment in which reviving a German nationalist perspective on the distant past could seem an attractive option. Thus, Wolfram has contributed decisively to moving the field forward from essentialist ideas about ethnic and national units to a vision of constant change in the composition of ethnic groups. Research has certainly made considerable further progress since he developed his approach in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and he has continued to contribute to unfolding its potential. Herwig Wolfram has never regarded his publications as the final word about a problem and has not hesitated to change his opinion when new arguments emerged.

When I participated in Wolfram’s first seminar in 1976, he had already had a brilliant career: He had spent the academic year 1968–69 in Los Angeles as a visiting professor at UCLA, and upon his return became professor at the age of thirty-five. His style as an academic teacher was visibly influenced by his American experience and was palpably different from that of most of his colleagues, who generally were more inclined to make their authority as professors felt in their interaction with students. His seminars were two- or three-day retreats at the monastery of Zwettl, including an after-work visit to the Abbey Tavern. In the first phase at the tavern, he always knew how to entertain a bunch of students; never a night-owl, he then withdrew, leaving the field to the younger generation, many of whom became friends at the occasion. The lively discussions with him rarely included questions of contemporary politics. To that extent, he was a represen-

tative of his generation in Austria. After the unsettling experience of his wartime childhood and living near the continental fault line of the Cold War, Herwig Wolfram and his generation seemed cautious not to rock the boat too much by engaging in controversial debates about political and societal issues. He had a clear distaste for anybody voicing totalitarian, chauvinistic, or in particular anti-Semitic opinions, and he would state this unmistakably if necessary. And he sought to invalidate all such tendencies in his field of research by solid scholarly arguments. Otherwise, he apparently enjoyed his room to move, unimpaired by any political pressure, both in his professional and his private life. He was aware that this was a huge privilege over his colleagues in Prague, Budapest, or Warsaw, which he basically owed to historical coincidence. As far as he could, he sought to provide opportunities for them, for instance by inviting them to conferences and by furnishing books. This support increased after 1989, when our colleagues in formerly socialist countries encountered both a new freedom and many new problems.

Wolfram's hesitation to engage critically, as a scholar and as a citizen, with the overall social and political conditions of his time is also felt in some of the passages of the following interview. What changed his life during his year in Los Angeles in 1968–69 was not the student movements, the hippies, or the Vietnam war. It was the encounter with the scholars who had escaped from Nazi Germany and who gave him precious access to an intellectual and scholarly culture that had disappeared from Vienna by the Nazi purge. Wolfram could then transmit this legacy to the younger generation. In particular, I had the privilege of long conversations with his friend Gerhard Ladner<sup>1</sup> during my term as a visiting faculty member at UCLA in 1993, which were then published as Ladner's autobiography. Thus, the re-appropriation of an academic heritage that had been purged from Austrian universities in 1938 (and in part, already before that) was one of Wolfram's lasting achievements.

Another achievement with a long-term impact was editing the fifteen-volume *Austrian History*, which he did from 1994 to 2006, in his

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1 Gerhart B. Ladner (1905–93), Austrian-Canadian historian.



Herwig Wolfram  
(Photo: Courtesy of Herwig Wolfram)

function as director of the Institute for Austrian Historical Research.<sup>2</sup> This had been a task first entrusted by the Austrian Academy to a committee of renowned scholars, who produced over the course of many years only one collaborative volume, about Austria in the High Middle Ages. Wolfram motivated single authors for the individual volumes, found a publisher who produced an attractive series, and solicited funding by a number of institutions. And he promoted critical debate about the ambiguity and historical transformations of the very concept of Austria. The credibility of any scholar who deals with a critique of nationalist positions hinges on his capability to view his own national identity with critical reserve. In this respect, Herwig Wolfram's track record is impeccable. His own works, plus the volumes of *Austrian History*, provide a sound basis for a critical reflection on Austrian and many other modern identities and their contradictory relationship with a distant past.

*Walter Pohl*

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<sup>2</sup> Herwig Wolfram, ed., *Österreichische Geschichte*, 15 vols. (Vienna: Ueberreiter, 1994–2006).



# Herwig Wolfram

## in Conversation with Walter Pohl

**WALTER POHL (WP):** *Let us start at the beginning and talk about the basic things first: family background, early recollections, and growing up during wartime.*

**HERWIG WOLFRAM (HW):** One of the most agitated times I have experienced in my life were probably my earliest days, weeks, and months. I was born in Vienna on February 14, 1934; in other words, during the brief civil war between the authoritarian Austrian government and the suppressed socialists (*Februarkämpfe*). My birth announcement included the sentence: “Trotz Not und Revolutionsgeschrei, der kleine Herwig kam herbei” (Despite hardship and revolutionary clamor, little Herwig came along). In July 1934, my mother and I were on holiday in Spital am Pyhrn, where heavy fighting broke out between insurgent National Socialists and the Austrian army, which resulted in many casualties on both sides.

My father, Friedrich (Fritz) Wolfram,<sup>1</sup> studied nineteenth-century history for his Ph.D. and took the teacher’s exams in history, geography, and German. Soon after the end of his studies in 1930, he was appointed by a private school in Mödling, a city south of Vienna; this was a time of great economic depression and a horribly high rate of unemployment. My father’s appointment was unusual luck for our young family, although my father later told me that he often felt ashamed because of his privileged position in the face of so many who had lost em-

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In parts of the interview, Max Diesenberger (MD) and Roland Steinacher (RS) also took part.

1 Friedrich (Fritz) Wolfram (1906–93).

ployment. My mother, Rosa,<sup>2</sup> did not return to work after my birth and was managing the household. We lived in a house that my maternal grandfather, Franz Lukschal,<sup>3</sup> had built; he was director of a primary school and retired in 1930. My paternal grandfather, Hermann Wolfram,<sup>4</sup> came from Thüringen, and, like many Germans in Vienna, founded a paint shop. He met my grandmother, Anna,<sup>5</sup> who was to become his second wife, at Windischgarsten (Upper Austria), where he and his first wife used to go on holiday. He had already died in 1910; not even my father could remember him.

I ended up as the eldest of five children: Gerhard (b.1936), Helga (b.1939), Reinald (b.1941), and Gunther (b.1944). One of my earliest recollections is that my father sat my brother Gerhard down on the ground during a hike in the mountains (to the Ötscher-Schutzhaus)—right into a cowpat. My first “political” memory is connected to March 13, 1938. Back then, we lived on the outskirts of Vienna, in the sixteenth district at the Wilhelminenberg. Although this sounds unbelievable today, we were unable to properly heat our flat with the available appliances. During the heating periods, therefore, we moved to my paternal grandmother’s flat on Schönbrunnerstraße in the fifth district. On the morning of March 13, 1938, I was looking out of the window when I saw a man armed with a rifle and wearing a red-white-red armlet suddenly attacked by a mob of people who took away his gun and beat him. I can still picture the hate-filled face of the man who hit him the hardest.

I also remember the last days of peace in 1939. Our family, at the time with three children, was spending a few days at Lake Fuschl in Salzburg towards the end of August 1939. At the western end of the lake, the mansion Schloss Fuschl can be found, which was then a part of the aryanized property of Joachim von Ribbentrop. On one of those days, the castle glowed with lights: its owner had just returned from having signed the fatal Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact in Moscow. With this treaty, the German attack on Poland on September 1, 1939 was agreed upon, as well as the Russian occupation of the Baltic states and the splitting of

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2 Rosa Wolfram, née Lukschal (1907–86).

3 Franz Lukschal (1877–1953).

4 Hermann Wolfram (1863–1910).

5 Anna Wolfram, née Grundner (1872–1952).

Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union. And I remember that on September 1, when the terrible war broke out, I stood in front of the fountain on the Residenzplatz in Salzburg for a while before we set out for the way back to Vienna, where I had to start schooling.

**WP:** *So how did you experience the war as a child?*

**HW:** I can say one thing about the war: none of our family ever was in a truly life-threatening situation. This even applied to my father, although he was at the front throughout the entire war, except for the academic year 1940–41. Until the winter of 1943–44, when the air raids started, Vienna was a comparatively safe place. But after the birth of my youngest brother, on January 10, 1944, my mother and my younger siblings left Vienna, while I continued going to school there. It must have been in July 1944 when I was on my own on the train that brought me to school from the Semmeringpass, a mountain resort, where my mother and my siblings had been evacuated to at that time. Somewhere close to Wiener Neustadt, the city that suffered most from bombings in Austria, we came into an air raid. The train was concealed in artificial fog and rerouted via Pottendorf. That was basically it.

I experienced July 20, 1944, like so many other things, from a worm's eye view. We still had school in July, following the Bavarian model. We were assembled, and an SS lieutenant appeared and told us that there had been an assassination attempt on the Führer. He also explained to us that the Führer had not been injured in the attack and that the SS had "taken care of this business." Now, we had one not particularly significant and actually quite unpopular teacher by the name of "Führer" at school, and I remember thinking, "An assassination attempt on this 'Führer,' and the SS took care of it?"

On the other hand, we children were indoctrinated in a manner that makes me shudder when I think about it. My maternal grandfather owned a little summer cottage with a garden in Weinzierl near Wieselburg an der Erlauf (Lower Austria). There, he planted various vegetables and other plants (including tobacco plants) during the war. A big problem which was ruining his horticultural efforts were the cabbage white butterflies which laid their eggs in all sorts of cabbage,

and then their caterpillars would eat the leaves and destroy the crops. So I was armed with a slingshot and given the instruction to exterminate the butterflies. At that time, everybody was talking about Werner Mölders,<sup>6</sup> a successful fighter pilot who had already shot down forty enemy airplanes, as they were called back then. So I tried to be just like him and shoot forty cabbage white butterflies as well. One butterfly equals one enemy pilot. During the summer of 1944, I visited my grandmother Anna Wolfram and found her and my aunt in tears. I remember thinking, “That’s it, my father fell on the ‘fields of honor.’” However, it was “only” his elder brother Otto. Of course, not much later, my thoughts on these matters had changed considerably.

Towards the end of the war, my mother took the five of us to Spital am Pyhrn in Upper Austria, where one day our father joined us. At the time it seemed like a miracle to us—and indeed, it was. My father—thank God for that—had broken his leg one night in a traffic accident shortly before the end of the war and was subsequently sent home. He was actually “sent home” from the horrors of World War II. From what he told me about the events of the war I remember mostly him being very satisfied with himself that he had never shot at another human being. Although some of our family members had fallen in the war, the seven of us had all survived, and that is why I was very happy.

**WP:** *Where did your father serve?*

**HW:** My father served in the Wehrmacht, and in April 1945 he was with his division on the retreat in what is now Štajerska, south of Windischgrätz (today: Slovenj Gradec), where he was also hospitalized after his injury. From Windischgrätz, he took a train to Spital am Pyhrn, equipped with an order issued by a chief physician that protected him from the SS, and was lucky enough to arrive safely. In the second half of 1944, my father had been granted a short period of leave at home, and at that time he discussed the flight of our family to Spital am Pyhrn with my mother. But that he actually made it home on April 30, 1945—limping but otherwise uninjured—still seemed like a miracle. Many of my

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6 Werner Mölders (1913–41).



generation were less fortunate. For example, the father of my classmate, Helmut Reimitz Sr., was killed shortly before the war ended while he tried to cross over the Danube close to Vienna, his home town.

**WP:** *What was your connection to Spital am Pyhrn?*

**HW:** My father's mother, Anna, came from Edlbach, a small village located somewhere between Spital am Pyhrn and Windischgarsten. Anna's brother Joseph Grundner, who at first offered us shelter, owned the Gasthaus zur Post (The Mail Inn) in Spital and had been its long-standing mayor prior to 1938. When we arrived in Spital am Pyhrn around April 10, we noticed that there were many Hungarians, in uniform as well as in civilian clothes. The reason for this was that in the catacombs beneath the presbytery of the collegiate church, thirty-three tons of gold belonging to the Hungarian National Bank were hidden, until the Americans confiscated it.

Shortly before the end of the war, the inmates of Ebensee concentration camp were driven through the village, a horrifying memory of mine. And then there was this local Hitlerjugend leader who again and again summoned me to "service," which in my case meant attending the weekly meetings (fortunately, I was too young to be part of the Volkssturm<sup>7</sup>). However, I did not attend but instead hiked up to the Linzer Haus, which belonged to Uncle Fritz, a distant relative of ours, together with my brother Gerhard, my aunt (the older sister of my father) and her daughter, who was seven years older than me. This must have been around April 25, 1945.

There, just beneath the Warscheneck (2388m), we stayed until the end of the war on May 8—sometimes it would touch us in a rather bizarre manner. Uncle Fritz had stored away enough food so that we had enough to eat. From these stores, German soldiers also profited when they made their way across the mountains. Fortunately, they usually had got rid of their weapons before they came to us. Sometimes they destroyed them, but at other times they just threw them away in the vicinity of our house, and those weapons would still work. In this case,

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7 *Volkssturm*: militia that consisted of teenagers and old men and was drafted at the end of the war.

we sometimes took them and started randomly shooting around. Thank God, our uncle was sensible enough to take them away from us. Our behavior was quite imprudent because Nazi propaganda had created the myth of the *Alpenfestung*,<sup>8</sup> full of young and determined *Werwölfe*,<sup>9</sup> and some Americans believed that the *Alpenfestung* was a real thing. When we boys, who were eleven, twelve, and thirteen at the time, came down from the Linzer Haus to Spital am Pyhrn together with some women—it must have been after Pentecost, after May 20, 1945—we bumped into a jeep full of GIs. They got out and pulled out their weapons. However, they quickly realized that we were not even carrying slingshots. But if they had seen us shooting around with Wehrmacht weapons, things might well have ended differently.

Meanwhile, down in Spital, the Sixth German Army fled from the Russians to go into captivity with the Americans. Along their escape route, hundreds of different vehicles were left behind, mainly on the fields surrounding the village. Like everybody else, my brother Gerhard and I also went there to look for anything we could somehow utilize. At one point, Gerhard suddenly held in his hand a weird, egg-shaped thing with a ring that basically invited one to pull it. I quickly explained to my younger brother that this was a Model 39 grenade, also called an “egg-hand-grenade,” and that he should better leave it where he found it. Later, he caught a horse, which my father took to the butcher to get it smoked, and which we ate during the harsh winter of 1945–46. My little brother and I also had a lot of gunpowder on hand, which we used to build small pipe bombs for blowing things up. In other words, the things that we had to endure, at the ages of eleven and nine, but also what we did while fooling around, would easily suffice today to bring our parents in front of a family court facing allegations of neglect.

**WP:** *How did you come back to Vienna from Spital am Pyhrn?*

**HW:** My father told the local American authorities that he would go to the closest *Entlassungslager* (release camp) in Mauerkirchen near

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8 *Alpenfestung*: the Eastern Alps allegedly fortified and to be defended by the *Wehrmacht* in 1945.

9 *Werwölfe* (werewolves): the regular and irregular troops who were supposed to man the *Alpenfestung*.

Braunau as soon as he could walk. He did so and spent around fourteen days there in June 1945. After his release he wanted to go directly to Vienna, and so he travelled dangerously on foot to Styria and then took a train to Vienna, which was at that time completely under the control of the Russians. After he was held for a short period by the Russians in the Styrian town of Bruck an der Mur, he arrived in Vienna on July 12, 1945. After some time, my mother and us five children also illegally crossed the Russian-American demarcation line at Steyr. The Americans basically indicated to us: well, cross the line, if you want to, just try it. We gave watches and other jewelry to the first Russian we met, and he safely escorted us to Lower Austria. I remember that it was a beautiful Indian summer's day. On our way, we stayed at a farmer's house for the night and boarded a train at the station of St. Valentin the next day. The train, however, departed late that day and drove through the night. At the Westbahnhof we met my father. That my parents had been able to stay in contact with each other and could therefore organize everything accordingly was possible only because they had found a woman who could legally cross the demarcation lines.

After we had arrived in Vienna, I was soon sent to school—to the Realgymnasium XVII Geblergasse. During the fall of 1945 my brother and I went “*hamstern*” (illegally buying food from the farmers around the towns). In the early morning—it was still dark—we took the tram through Vienna to the Marchfeld. The police searched people at the final stop in Groß-Enzersdorf and confiscated all the food they found. But children with school bags were not searched, and so we could bring home our bags filled to the top with flour.

**WP:** *What kind of atmosphere do you remember in school—were there still inveterate Nazis after 1945, or was a more positive attitude towards Austria prevalent? And how did you yourself feel about it?*

**HW:** One of my school mates, Norbert Benesch,<sup>10</sup> came from a family with a Christian-Social resistance background; his elder brother died as

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<sup>10</sup> Norbert Benesch (1934–84).

cannon fodder in a punitive battalion (Strafkompanie) in Italy. At the thirteenth anniversary of our final exams, Norbert told us: “Whichever political milieu one came from or whatever one’s political background was, we all had to adapt, from being pupils of a *Deutsche Oberschule für Jungen* (as the German school type was called) to being students of an *Österreichisches Gymnasium für Buben* (the Austrian designation). Some of us reached this goal—to become Austrian—only after they left school.” Concerning myself, the final conclusion of my personal transformation was the publication of the fifteen-volume *Austrian History* between 1994 and 2006. On my multifaceted professional journey, with its Austrian as well as international stops, an Austrian identity arose that is closely connected to two institutions: an open Catholicism and a likewise open Austrian democracy. In any case, one of the most important and happiest days of my life was May 15, 1955, when the Austrian State Treaty was signed, and the de facto Russian occupation ended. Now we were not just liberated—we were free. We discussed the consequences of this day a lot, for example, whether we should have a national army. When this army was actually established, we—who were born before 1936—were considered to be “white age cohorts” (*Weisse Jahrgänge*), which meant that we were exempt from any form of military service.

Along with teachers on whose qualities—both subject-wise and morally—I do not want to comment any further, we also had teachers who had amazing personalities and were great role models in every respect. Two of them were of special importance to me and my further direction in life. Erwin Hahn<sup>11</sup> taught history and German. When he started teaching at our school in 1945, our headmaster took Hahn’s reference documents where the Nazi officials had made their unfavorable entries and said: “You were a courageous man; a small, courageous man.” Later Hahn told us that if he had not been drafted into the Wehrmacht, he probably would have been imprisoned in a concentration camp. Gallus, as we called him, baptized us with literature so to speak, and also turned us into theater lovers. I became the local representative of the Theater der Jugend (Theater for Young People) and was my own best customer, up to three times a week. The first time I went

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11 Erwin Hahn (1912–2010).

to the Burgtheater was in 1946, on my twelfth birthday. Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* was being performed, and Raoul Aslan<sup>12</sup> played Nathan in a manner unforgettable to me. We also had a great classics teacher. My decision to study history and Latin and become a teacher surely had a lot to do with these two inspiring figures. Of course, history had always fascinated me, along with languages, and it was soon clear that I would study history, like my father had done before me.

**WP:** *Did your family's tradition of becoming teachers have something to do with your decision to pursue a career in education?*

**HW:** Very probably yes. My father was a teacher, my grandfather and great-grandfather on my mother's side likewise. A tradition, by the way, which was adhered to even more so on my wife's maternal Tyrolean side of the family and which could be traced back on to the northern as well as the southern side of the Brenner until far back into the nineteenth century. I was a good student, and often those who are good students and who obviously cope well with the educational system go on to become teachers themselves and thus perpetuate this system. In any case, I was sure that I wanted to become a teacher.

**WP:** *And what about the subject choice—Latin?*

**HW:** Latin was a natural choice because of my Latin teacher. I have to confess, however, that I had my difficulties with the German-Latin classes. The linguistic education that we alumni of a realgymnasium had was considerably less advanced compared to the one that alumni of the gymnasium<sup>13</sup> enjoyed and which was assumed the norm at the universities. We had to complete four terms of the German-Latin proseminar with the final grade of *Gut* (B) to be allowed to advance further in the study course. Although this took me five terms, in the end I had no problems in writing a paper in Latin at my teacher's exam in 1958.

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<sup>12</sup> Raoul Aslan (1886–1958), theater actor.

<sup>13</sup> The Austrian gymnasium then offered Latin and Greek, the realgymnasium only Latin.

**WP:** *How did you experience the political situation after the end of the war, on the one hand personally, on the other politically?*

**HW:** When I ask myself or am asked by others today how I experienced the political situation back then, I have to confess that I realized neither the complete defeat of Germany, nor our liberation, nor the abominable crimes of the Nazis that had become known. I understand that this sounds strangely indifferent. But for the occasion of this interview I have spoken with a good number of friends of my age about it, and they have endorsed my memories. Maybe I was under a sort of shock. I do not know, really. Back then, if I remember correctly, I basically took everything for granted and simply accepted it the way it was. Many buildings in Vienna, including St. Stephen's Cathedral, the Opera, and the Burgtheater had been destroyed. When you took a train that went through the train station at Amstetten, there was one track that was open and everything to your left and right was in ruins. But that was how it was. Although the times were extreme, I had a wonderful late childhood and early youth and for this I am grateful to my parents, some of my teachers, and the Boy Scouts.

One small example which might illustrate the situation: My brother and I were given a lot of advice when we went on our first cycling tour in Lower Austria, in case any Russians wanted to take our bikes. However, we completed our tour without any such thing happening. With the Russians, there was always the problem of communication. With the Americans and the British, you just had to speak a little bit of English to talk to them or even to get a ride in their cars. With the French, it was similar. But almost none of us spoke Russian. The one exception was a relative of my mother who spoke Russian quite well. He had already been released from Russian captivity before Christmas 1945, apparently, because he was not considered to be quite sane. During the exam for one of the first release dates he was so excited and also confused that he used the *Hitlergruß* on the Russian officer and doctor who were present (the Nazi salute had become compulsory for all German soldiers in summer 1944) even though he had never been a Nazi himself. So they sent him home. The scene could remind one of the behavior of Private Švejk in Jaroslav Hašek's novel about World War I.

Once I was on a train from Wieselburg to Neubruck near Scheibbs with this relative, and there was a Russian sergeant with whom he had a long talk about all sorts of matters, and we were included in, and enjoyed, the conversation. During my academic career I have often regretted my failure in learning a Slavic language; but nevertheless, I have studied Slavic history more and more over time. Once, a Polish colleague told me: "You might be a *Niemiec*,<sup>14</sup> but you have a Slavic heart." Other situations of contact with the Russians included the demarcation lines, where we would have to show our identification papers. None of us had had any troubles with the Russians. However, the Americans once had my father get off a train at Enns because he, the great professor, had not signed his identification papers. He signed and was then allowed to board the next train.

The decade between May 1945 and May 1955 was surely a time of great insecurity and fear. We had all heard about raids by "unknown persons," as the contemporary language dictated us to call them, and about lootings, abductions, rape, and murder. And yet, I remember these ten years after the war as a time of progress, of development, the overcoming of narrow-mindedness, dullness, and provincialism; in short, a time of increasing freedom, of liberation. Moreover, we were healthy most of the time, and so we got by. We could not indulge, but, thank God, we never had to starve, mostly because we had support from many sides. Our relatives in Wieselburg an der Erlauf were carpenters and farmers, and their sons lived with us for some time while finishing their professional education, which meant an important additional food source for us. Then my brother Gerhard was sent to a farmer in Molln, Upper Austria, and my sister Helga spent almost a year with a family in Namèche, close to Namur in Belgium, in 1948–49. She came back as round as a ball and blabbering away in French. We also received help from Sweden, where my mother had been sent to live with a foster family for two and a half years after World War I. Now her foster sister, who was the same age as her, sent us clothes and food. In the summer of 1946, the scout group that my brother Gerhard and I had joined in February was invited to Montafon in Vorarlberg,

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14 *Niemiec* means "German," as well as "speechless" in Slavic languages.

where there was enough food for everybody. And from then on everything just got better with time.

This positive way of thinking that “it has got better and better” probably defines my personal optimism until this day. An addition to this is the fact that the Austrian form of democracy and statehood has gotten progressively more successful and, more importantly, more credible over time. In October and November of 1950, Franz Olah,<sup>15</sup> who was then the chairman of the trade unions of construction and wood workers, prevented what was regarded as an attempted communist coup. His people were quite ready to use violence, even in the Soviet zone, where the Austrian police were not allowed to intervene. These events were the occasion which Interior Minister Oskar Helmer<sup>16</sup> used as grounds to dismiss numerous communist members from the police.

Furthermore, there was the myth of “Austria as the first victim of National Socialism.” Now, etiological myths or *pourquoi* stories are never true; nevertheless, they can be useful—at least for a time. However, they have to be dissolved at some point, and in Austria this happened quite late and not without crisis; but it did happen, during the 1980s and 1990s.

**WP:** *Did you have the opportunity to travel abroad during your youth?*

**HW:** Very early I felt the necessity of overcoming the Austrian narrowness and its provincial mindset. We were lucky enough to witness a first small opening of the many borders that surrounded Austria and also divided it into four zones of occupation. This was in 1946 in Montafon, near the Swiss border. In the summers of 1949 and 1950 my brother and I travelled around Austria on foot and by very, very old bikes. In the summer of 1951 for the first time I crossed the border into another country, to Switzerland, to take part in a youth gathering at Davos. I travelled the whole way by bike, together with a friend, and we were received very warmly. After my graduation from high school in 1952 my parents took me to Italy for the first time, to see the Adria,

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<sup>15</sup> Franz Olah (1910–2009), Austrian interior minister (1963–64), member of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).

<sup>16</sup> Oskar Helmer (1887–1963), Austrian interior minister (1945–59), member of the SPÖ.



and then in 1953 I travelled with the Scouts to Western Austria and the South of Germany. In 1954, I hitchhiked to France and Spain with friends. In the port of Marseille, we witnessed the embarkation of young Germans who had enlisted into the French Foreign Legion. We talked for a while until one of them said: "Don't listen to the stupid Austrians." The argument could have ended badly. Dien Bien Phu had only surrendered on May 7, 1954, and every second member of the foreign legion came from a German-speaking country. From Barcelona we took a boat to the two islands of Ibiza and Formentera—then completely untouched, and which I have consciously avoided ever since—and then back to the mainland to Alicante. From there, we went home via Madrid, Paris, and Strasbourg.

In 1955, only a few weeks after the signing of the Austrian State Treaty on May 15, my three friends and I set out for another great journey. While in 1954 we had still had to get a written confirmation from our parish priest that we were Catholic in order to get a Spanish visa, we now travelled freely through half of Europe. We were ready to "seek the country of the Greeks with the soul." We hitchhiked to Bari, then took the ramshackle *Ekaterina* via Corfu to Patras and then hitchhiked again to Olympia. At Olympia we spent our first Greek night "at the holy street of the temples." The next morning, we hitchhiked through the Peloponnese to Mycenae's Lion Gate, and from there went to Athens. There, we stayed at the university dorms—I had already looked up the address in Vienna. In the evening, we visited the Parthenon for the first time and stayed there—which seems impossible today—until late into the night. Finally, we travelled via Delphi and the North of Greece to the little village Nike, where we were no longer served *mávro psomí* and *neró*, but instead *chleb* and *voda* (bread and water). After that, we walked across the border to Yugoslavia at Bitola/Monastir, the southernmost Macedonian city. In Bitola, we met Turks who told us that they planned to emigrate soon. We saw Bulgarians whom you could easily recognize from their traditional clothes. But we also met people who proudly called themselves Macedonians and who sang us their songs of freedom to prove their Macedonian identity.

Then we went on, through Serbia and Croatia. When we arrived at Zagreb in a pig transport, a man told us in perfect German that we

would never find wives as long as we stank like this. The next day we were on a truck driving up north. The driver was from Tržič/Neumarkt, situated on the southern slope of the Loibl Pass, near the border between Slovenia and Carinthia, but he did not want to be at his final destination before 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. So he took us to a Slovenian bath. We had a shower beforehand but still, when we entered the swimming pool, each of us swam in a dark pool, like a squid. We arrived in Tržič in the rain, and from there it was an Austrian *Postbus* which took us to Klagenfurt. And so we finally came home, after almost five weeks on the road—safely but also very different from what we were when we set out. This journey to Greece is one of my most profound memories.

**WP:** *So it was no problem to hitchhike in a group of four people at that time?*

**HW:** Oh, that was easy back then. In 1955, I wrote a few lines about this situation which really captured the feeling: “Stehen am Straßenrand ist kein Warten im Ungewissen, auch wenn der Abend kommt mit Regentüchern. Stehen am Straßenrand ist Fahrtbeginn und Fahrtende, dazwischen liegt das Land unserer Sehnsucht. Unbestimmt sind die Übergänge. Fahrt und Wiederkehr sind eins, denn wir gehen fort, um heim zu kommen.” (Standing on the side of the road is not waiting in vain, even though the evening comes along with sheets of rain. Standing on the side of the road is the beginning of the trip and the end; in between there is the land of our longing. Undetermined are the transitions. Journey and return are one—because we only leave to come home.) The roads were in a pitiful state, the vehicles slow, but the people were friendly. The road from Olympia to Tripoli was rather poorly restored after an earthquake had destroyed it. The road from Greece to Macedonia was covered with grass, as was the highway between Beograd and Zagreb. There was almost no traffic, but if there was a car, we would have been picked up and given a ride as a matter of course. The people were incredibly friendly; we had no problems whatsoever. Even when I talked to a Serbian student about Spalato instead of Split, I was only shortly rebuked and that was

it. Only on our first night in Macedonia we acted rather dumbly: because it had rained, we tried to sleep in a barn next to a farmer's house rather than just sleeping outside. The people could not understand us and so went to call the *milicija*. Once we communicated our peaceful intentions to the police, we were not only allowed to sleep in the barn, we were also treated with a breakfast by our, at first involuntary, hosts the next morning.

**WP:** *Did you notice anything about the political situation on your journey? In Greece, for example, the times of the civil war were not that far gone.*

**HW:** Weirdly enough, we noticed almost nothing that we could connect to it. In Mycenae, a farmer praised Hitler, which I remember because I was so stunned by it. But even Greeks who had been in German captivity were friendly towards us. One reason, I think, was because they were curious from where and to where we were travelling. But also perhaps because we were leading such a simple life during our journey.

**WP:** *And how did your studies go at that time?*

**HW:** Studying and travelling through Europe were one and the same. Both meant opening up and overcoming the narrowness that had resulted from the respective ideologies I had previously been confronted with. Therefore, in the summer term of 1955, I had completed the lecture course on Greek temples held by Fritz Eichler<sup>17</sup> in order to be prepared for my summer travels in Greece. I returned from the Athenian Theater of Dionysus with a photograph of the inscription in which Emperor Hadrian is mentioned as the first proconsul of Upper Pannonia, which I gave to Artur Betz,<sup>18</sup> professor of ancient history at the University of Vienna.

When one came to the University of Vienna in October of 1952 to study history and Latin, one could meet great scholars at the Institute

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<sup>17</sup> Fritz Eichler (1887–1971), Austrian archaeologist

<sup>18</sup> Artur Betz (1905–85), Austrian historian.

of Classical Philology. Among them were Albin Lesky<sup>19</sup> and Walther Kraus,<sup>20</sup> with whom I took my teacher's exam. I was especially taken by Lesky's interpretations of religious history: for example, of the sixth song of Vergil's *Aeneid*. In his seminar, I wrote a paper on Tibullus's *Ambarvalia* poem. Another great professor was Walther Kraus, especially when he talked about Cicero's speeches or philosophical works. But he was also special because he took a political stance which was rare at the university back then. Once we studied a legal speech by Cicero, and a colleague translated *intolerabilis* with *untragbar* (insufferable). Suddenly, the professor who was otherwise so calm started up and shouted: "Spare me this Nazi terminology. I have suffered enough from it!"

At the Historical Institute, however, there was an associate professor of only forty years of age called Heinrich Fichtenau.<sup>21</sup> Alphons Lhotsky<sup>22</sup> did not impress me much back then. When I saw Lhotsky entering lecture hall 41 for the first time, I thought Franz Grillparzer<sup>23</sup> had risen from the dead, and I had rejected this poet already as a student. This has changed in the meantime—with Lhotsky as well as with Grillparzer. But back then it was like this: the connection to Heinrich Fichtenau determined my life—and not only in the professional sense. It seems incredible that so much time has already passed since I delivered his funerary eulogy in June 2000.

Of course, there was much to learn also from Hugo Hantsch,<sup>24</sup> from Heinrich Benedikt,<sup>25</sup> with whom I took my teacher's exam in modern history, from the sensitive philologist Gertrud Herzog-Hauser,<sup>26</sup> and from Artur Betz. He taught basic knowledge of ancient history, spiced up with unintentionally funny episodes that made one think of some campus comedies. Although Betz did nothing else but divide Ernst Kornemann's history of Rome into bite-sized pieces and

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19 Albin Lesky (1896–1981), Austrian historian.

20 Walther Kraus (1902–97), Austrian historian.

21 Heinrich Fichtenau (1912–2000), Austrian medievalist, director of the IÖG (1962–83).

22 Alphons Lhotsky (1903–68), Austrian historian.

23 Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872), Austrian writer.

24 Hugo Hantsch (1895–1972), Austrian historian.

25 Heinrich Benedikt (1886–1981), Austrian historian.

26 Gertrud Herzog-Hauser (1894–1953), Austrian historian.

serve it to his students, he also proved his extraordinary competences in epigraphy in his seminar, to which he had invited me already in my second term. Someone who is also to be named here is of course the head of the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (further: IÖG; Institute of Austrian Historical Research), Leo Santifaller.<sup>27</sup> Erich Zöllner's<sup>28</sup> pioneering work, *The Political Status of the Peoples in the Frankish Empire*,<sup>29</sup> had just been published in 1950 although he had written it aged twenty-three, in 1939. However, it was not met with the appreciation that it should have received; Reinhard Wenskus's<sup>30</sup> book *Ethnogenesis and Constitution: The Becoming of the Early-Medieval Gentes*<sup>31</sup> largely followed the approach of Zöllner's book. But that had also been the case for Fichtenau and his revolutionary work *The Carolingian Imperium: Social and Intellectual Problems of an Empire*,<sup>32</sup> translated into English, French, and Italian. The Viennese, as well as Austrian and German medieval studies in general, were too limited in their traditions, or what could comfortably be presented as tradition. To clarify: there also exists an uncomfortable continuation of tradition, one that is creative. At the Historical Institute, back then still called the "Seminary of History," there were two assistant professors, Fritz Fellner<sup>33</sup> and Günther Hamann.<sup>34</sup> Hugo Hantsch, who was the acting chair of the institute at that time, mostly came by on Saturdays before noon to check if the assistant professors were guarding the doors correctly. That much must be said just to illustrate the conditions back then.

**WP:** *Apart from professors and teachers at the institute, did you have other important encounters at the time?*

27 Leo Santifaller (1890–1974), Austrian historian, director of the IÖG (1945–62).

28 Erich Zöllner (1916–96), Austrian historian.

29 Erich Zöllner, *Die politische Stellung der Völker im Frankenreich*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 13 (Vienna: Universum, 1950).

30 Reinhard Wenskus (1916–2002), German historian.

31 Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1961; 2nd ed. 1977).

32 Heinrich Fichtenau, *Das karolingische Imperium: Soziale und geistige Problematik eines Grossreiches* (Zurich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1949).

33 Fritz Fellner (1922–2012), Austrian historian.

34 Günther Hamann (1924–94), Austrian historian.

**HW:** Around the time of my graduation (*Promotion*) in the spring of 1957 a German student appeared at the University of Vienna. He was already somewhat older and was called Hans Pflaumer.<sup>35</sup> He spoke excellent idiomatic English, French, and Italian, was a relative of Albert Einstein, and very early had lost his father, who had been murdered by SA soldiers in 1933. We became friends, and we still are. The initiating moment of our friendship was an inappropriate German-nationalistic comment by a student that I rebuked. I really do not remember what he said and what I said, but I must have hit the point.

Later, in 1968–69, I was prepared and ready to go to UCLA with my family, largely thanks to the immense broadening of my horizon for which Hans Pflaumer was responsible. Meeting Hans resulted in my turn to the Catholic Church as well as in my infinite appreciation for democracy. Hans was on his own quest, to plan his life via the routes of philosophy and theology, but then chose an entirely different path, professionally as well as religiously, which later led him back to his Jewish roots. Under his influence I was able to experience a form of emancipation from the past, something for which I will be endlessly grateful as long as I live.

**WP:** *So this was something that was not self-evident in your surroundings?*

**HW:** Absolutely not. I have vehemently rejected two things from very early on. First, setting off Coventry against Dresden, or the horrors of the KZs against the treatment of the Boers in the Boer Wars. And secondly, I refused to accept any clichés of outward appearance, like somebody looks Jewish, Scandinavian, Arabic, or Russian. Gerhart B. Ladner is the perfect example for this meaningless search for “human types.” As a Jew, he was blond and had blue eyes, and in 1938 an Austrian (or maybe already German) representative in Rome had told him: “You fulfil the Nuremberg Race Laws for being a proper German!”

**WP:** *So how did you meet Gerhart Ladner?*

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35 Hans Pflaumer (b.1930).

**HW:** During the summer term of 1965 the International Historical Congress took place in Vienna. At the same time the scandal about the anti-Semitic and National Socialist comments by Taras Borodajkewycz,<sup>36</sup> who was professor of history at the then University of World Trade (now Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration), broke out. During the protests against his comments, the former resistance fighter Ernst Kirchweyer<sup>37</sup> was killed by a right-wing militant. The young Social Democrats Ferdinand Lacina,<sup>38</sup> later minister of finance, and Heinz Fischer,<sup>39</sup> later president of Austria, were largely responsible for the shift of the public opinion that finally worked against the professor. Borodajkewycz had to retire in 1966, a year after the congress.

Our alumnus of the IÖG and professor at UCLA, Gerhart B. Ladner, also participated in this congress in 1965. Ladner visited Fichtenau at the IÖG, among others, and Fichtenau asked him if he could review my book *Splendor Imperii: The Epiphany of Virtue and Salvation in Reign and Empire*.<sup>40</sup> Ladner did not write reviews anymore and did not make an exception for my book. However, he said that he knew the book and that he liked it. A few days later, an awkward situation almost occurred. Fichtenau, who was holding a reception for the participants of the congress, had troubles with his eyes. The entrance to the institute was at the end of a hallway next to a lecture hall and was very badly lit. Ladner appeared and started walking toward Fichtenau and me. Fichtenau, however, believed that it was Borodajkewycz, as both of them actually looked alike, and wanted to kick him out right away. I was standing right next to Fichtenau, and so I said: "Oh, here comes Professor Ladner!" Fichtenau was startled, and Ladner must have noticed that something was wrong.

**WP:** *Ladner had had problems at the University of Vienna early on, already as a student, because of being a Jew.*

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36 Taras Borodajkewycz (1902–84), Austrian historian, National Socialist.

37 Ernst Kirchweyer (1898–1965).

38 Ferdinand Lacina (b.1942), social democrat.

39 Heinz Fischer (b.1938), president of Austria (2004–16).

40 Herwig Wolfram, *Splendor Imperii: Die Epiphanie von Tugend und Heil in Herrschaft und Reich*, *MIÖG*: supplemental volume 20/3 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1963).

**HW:** Already in 1931, Ladner was denied entry to a university ball by a member of a *schlagende Burschenschaft* (German nationalist students' fraternity). Ladner then challenged him to a duel and took fencing lessons. However, the student rejected his challenge because in his eyes, as a Jew, Ladner did not have the right to challenge him to a duel. When Ladner told me this story, we did not know if we should laugh or cry about it. But we agreed that we would have to be prepared to meet contemporaries who mentally still roamed the Germanic virgin forests, together with Marbod and Arminius. Maybe this ideological unsimultaneity of the simultaneous was the reason why I, as could be read in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on February 10, 2014, "strode through the entire area of this early Germanic world on a scholarly quest."

**WP:** *At some point during your studies it must have become clear that you would not merely aim for a career as a school teacher. You went on to complete the course at the IÖG in 1959, which offered an extensive education in the historical auxiliary sciences and whose students were prepared for a career in academia. How did that come about?*

**HW:** Fritz Fellner first noticed me because he, a fervent soccer fan, had organized a match between a team from the Historical Institute and a team from the Austrian National Library. Although I do not play well, I took part and scored, rather coincidentally I must say, the decisive goal. This is how Fellner took notice of me. My interest in this type of research became further promoted through a job I had accepted after coming back from Greece, as I needed to earn money for a new winter coat. I worked on the *Linzer Regesten* (a collection of abstracts of charters relevant for the medieval history of Linz) in the monastery of Kremsmünster during the September of 1955. One day, the archivist and historian of the monastery, P. Willibrord Neumüller OSB,<sup>41</sup> led us into a small room. Then he vanished and reappeared with a small bag from which he took, in a very mysterious manner, the Tassilo Chalice and the two so-called Tassilo Candelabras. We were all deeply impressed, not least be-

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41 P. Willibrord Neumüller OSB (1909–78).



cause of the size of the chalice, whose *cuppa* contains 1.75 liters. For this, Willibrord had one of his typical tongue-in-cheek explanations. According to the rule of Saint Benedict, the monks were entitled to a *hemina* of wine per day which would be about 0.27 liters. But Willibrord claimed that the rule was not talking about this rather insignificant unit but instead about the contents of the Tassilo Chalice, namely 1.75 litres, to which the monks would be entitled daily.

When I returned to Vienna in October of 1955, I met Fellner, and he said, "Next year a new *Institutskurs* commences and you will join." And I was prepared to do so. In the fall of 1956, the preparatory course began, and at the same time I was writing the final version of my dissertation, or rather dictating it to my future wife Heidi,<sup>42</sup> who had complete command of the typewriter, which I had not.

On April 11, 1957, I graduated, and on July 1, 1957, I was accepted as a full member at the IÖG, with stipend. The lectures and seminars of the main study course were important and provided us with the necessary methodological background, but were neither especially challenging nor time-consuming. I was not the only participant of the course who had found the preparatory course much more stimulating. So there was enough time left for other things. Heidi and I got married on April 8, 1958, and I started the teacher's exams in history and Latin. And then came February 1959. Hugo Hantsch, the director of the Historical Institute, was at the Ministry of Education on account of some business; when he was leaving the ministry, an official asked whether he could make use of an assistant. There were times in the Austrian educational politics when such things were possible, albeit these periods were short. In any case, Hantsch now had at his disposal the position of an assistant professor but did not know whom he should reward with it. His students all had jobs already and therefore declined his offer. Fellner proposed me for the position and in the end got me through, presumably with Fichtenau's support. So I became a research assistant in February 1959 and then, on April 1, 1959, an assistant professor at the Seminary (later the Institute) for History at the University of Vienna.

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42 Heidi Wolfram, née Schörghofer (b.1937).

This position gave me the opportunity to get to know Hugo Hantsch personally and as a teacher in his *Privatissimum* (doctoral seminar), for which I am still grateful. He continuously invited stimulating and interesting personalities: for example, Otto Friedländer,<sup>43</sup> who had to leave Vienna when the Nazis took over, and who was an active pacifist and the author of a book called *Last Splendour of the City of Dreams: That was Vienna Around 1900*.<sup>44</sup> We also heard a talk by Fritz Fellner when he was editing the political diary of Josef Redlich.<sup>45</sup> I am also grateful to Friedrich Engel-Janosi,<sup>46</sup> who had taught at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., for seventeen years before he returned to Vienna in 1959. For example, he introduced me to the works by Eric Voegelin.<sup>47</sup> Engel-Janosi never really adapted to the Austrian situation and felt, unfortunately sometimes rightly so, mistreated by the bureaucracy. Engel-Janosi and his wife, Carlette, who unfortunately died in 1963 after severe suffering, tried to establish an academic social life in the American sense in Vienna. His memoirs, ... *but a Proud Beggar: Memories from a Lost Generation*,<sup>48</sup> relate his impressions, as a cosmopolitan bourgeois coming from a Jewish family in the environment of Austrian academia, to the general situation in the US.

Despite all these stimulating inputs, Heinrich Fichtenau remained the most impressive character for me; and so I stayed in Vienna and turned to medieval studies. On the one hand, Fichtenau was my role model as a scholar and academic teacher, and he was a medievalist. On the other hand, I had always been interested in the question of continuity, that is, what remains from an empire that had collapsed—what can survive a catastrophe, for better or worse. This interest was surely due to my experiences as a child and a youth. Thus, the fate of Rome and the Early Middle Ages were obvious choices as research topics.

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43 Otto Friedländer (1889–1963), writer.

44 Otto Friedländer, *Letzter Glanz der Märchenstadt: Das war Wien um 1900* (Vienna and Munich: Gardena, 1969).

45 Josef Redlich (1869–1935), jurist, politician.

46 Friedrich Engel-Janosi (1893–1978), Austrian–American historian.

47 Eric Voegelin (1901–85), political philosopher.

48 Friedrich Engel-Janosi, *...aber ein stolzer Bettler: Erinnerungen aus einer verlorenen Generation* (Graz: Styria, 1974).

**WP:** *What was your relationship to Alphons Lhotsky at the beginning of your academic career?*

**HW:** Rather ambivalent. In January 1957, I took the *Rigorosum* (doctoral oral exam) and did very well, so he supported me. In late autumn 1957, he suggested me for a position at the Museum of Military History in Vienna. Also, the impulse for writing a thesis on the term *splendor imperii* initially came from Lhotsky. I asked Walther Kraus if I could write my Latin thesis on the development of the concept of the splendor of the empire from antiquity onward. He accepted my proposal at the time but once the thesis was written I almost failed the course. I gave the manuscript to Kraus and he soon called me into his office and told me: "Herr Wolfram, your thesis is excellent and I accept it, but you have to realize it is simply not a philological thesis." Lhotsky was not as generous. He had expected me to write on the glory of the House of Habsburg and was now disappointed. In my *Splendor Imperii* he only saw a philological thesis. He was the only one, as far as I know, who rejected the idea of my appointment as assistant professor with the words: "What do you want with this philologist?" Now, Lhotsky had, of course, not invented the concept of the splendor of the Habsburgs. Otto Friedländer's *Last Splendour of the City of Dreams* was based on it as well as on the work of Samuel Pufendorf,<sup>49</sup> who had argued that the only reason for the Habsburgs being imperial/holding the title Kaiser was their splendor. However, without the classical as well as medieval history of this term, Friedländer and Pufendorf would not have been provided enough material to write whole books on splendor. In any case, in this first semantic study of mine, I learned a lot about dealing with sources and also about motif research. Fichtenau was then the one who organized its publication. To receive the necessary funding from the authorities I first had to speak to Fichtenau's uncle, Fritz Schachermeyr,<sup>50</sup> an ancient historian. Back then, he was essentially a one-man research funding committee. I wrote a proposal, and Fichtenau corrected it by saying: "This is far too long. Uncle does not read

49 Samuel Pufendorf (1632–94), jurist, political philosopher, statesman, historian.

50 Fritz Schachermeyr (1895–1987), Austrian historian.

more than a page.” Then I had to contact the president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Richard Meister.<sup>51</sup> He wore suspenders and was working on some files. Although he initially seemed grumpy because of the disturbance, he promised to support me, and he did.

**WP:** *What exactly was Fichtenau’s position at the time?*

**HW:** Fichtenau had been appointed associate professor for medieval history in 1950 and remained in this position for twelve years. Leo Santifaller had initially supported his appointment because, as Fichtenau said: “I was no use to him as an assistant (professor).” However, after Fichtenau had been promoted, Santifaller marginalized him and excluded him from the teaching activities at the IÖG. Santifaller was strongly opposed to Fichtenau becoming his successor, but Fichtenau prevailed in 1962 and then assigned me as an assistant professor at the IÖG.

**ROLAND STEINACHER (RS):** *What was the political atmosphere at the university when you were a student there?*

**HW:** In the student representatives’ elections during the 1950s and 1960s the *Ring Freiheitlicher Studenten* (RFS, right-wing student organization connected to what was to become the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) won almost a third of the votes, the students’ organization connected to the conservative ÖVP (*Österreichische Volkspartei*) got almost two thirds of the votes, while the socialist students received only a small minority of the votes. As there was no student participation in decision-making at the time, these results had little impact; but they are indicative of the atmosphere then. In the general elections the Grand Coalition of ÖVP and SPÖ (Social Democrats) always won the overwhelming majority of votes. The achievements of the Grand Coalition after 1945 are hardly deniable. However, despite the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 and the excellent managing of the Hungarian crisis of 1956, the Grand Coalition became increasingly incapable of im-

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51 Richard Meister (1881–1964), principal of the University of Vienna (1949–50), director of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (1951–63).

plementing necessary reforms and thereby modernizing the country. The coalition came to an end in 1966. I was surely not the only one who welcomed the conservative government of Josef Klaus,<sup>52</sup> who received an absolute majority of votes in the general elections of 1966. Although I have never bound myself to a party, I became active in university politics in 1967. I was summoned to the Raacher Hochschulrat, a committee that met at the little Lower Austrian town of Raach, by Minister Theodor Piffl-Perčević.<sup>53</sup> Members of this panel included ministerial officials and people with and without party affiliations, professors and non-professorial teaching staff, as well as students. The minister had waived his right to issue directives to his officials who served on this committee. Therefore, there was an openness of mind and an absence of ideology here that was never to be seen again in Austrian education politics. Already the General University Law of 1966 reflected this atmosphere. I have to admit that I did not contribute much. But I learnt a lot, I got to know people who were able to decide things, and I got a feeling for legal thinking and political negotiation.

This actually came in very handy when Karl Brunner<sup>54</sup> and I drew up a new curriculum for studying history, both for the teaching degree and the master course. We got them accepted by the study committees of all Austrian universities and finally by the Ministry of Education as well. Back then, I met an official who had a problem with the fact that the curriculum included a compulsory course simply called “seminar” without further specifications as to its content. To put it in other words, this legal expert thought the contents of each and every lecture course had to be specified, so instead of “seminar of medieval history” it should be called, for instance, “Charlemagne and the Austrian region,” and this for every semester and every year until Doomsday was just around the corner. The backing of the Austrian study committees helped, primarily, to argue against this, but so also did my experiences at the Raacher Hochschulrat, where I had already met such absurd legalistic ideas.

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52 Josef Klaus (1910–2001), chancellor of Austria (1964–70), member of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP).

53 Theodor Piffl-Perčević (1911–94), Austrian politician of the ÖVP.

54 Karl Brunner (b.1944), Austrian historian.

**WP:** *Let us go back for a moment to the political-intellectual atmosphere in Austria. You mentioned that you were glad to escape the provincialism of postwar Austria. I can imagine that your travels were indeed somewhat liberating to you—so were mine when I was a student. Could you describe this provincial atmosphere a bit more?*

**HW:** I am happy to talk about this question, if only because we often use words and terms to express emotions, and we tend to forget that this terminology actually belongs to the field of *ratio* instead of emotion. Based on my personal experiences in postwar Austria, my special role as director of the IÖG and as publisher of Austrian history, I would say: Provincialism always develops out of a concern for particular identities that seem to be constantly under threat, either from the outside or from the inside. It is also created from the feeling that the central authority does not safeguard, acknowledge, and appreciate this identity. As a result, one locks oneself in and also reacts by overcompensating; the self is put at the top of an imaginary hierarchy. Of course, I can only attempt this definition today. When I came to the École nationale des chartes in Paris in the winter of 1964–65 on a scholarship, or to Los Angeles in 1968–69 as visiting professor, my liberation from Austrian provincialism was prevalently an emotional one.

Concerning the political and intellectual atmosphere in the postwar period, I certainly cannot contradict you. I will answer this question with the words of Herbert Matis: “By dealing with the problem of denazification in a purely legal sense, a lasting and interior confrontation with National Socialism never happened.”<sup>55</sup> I think that after 1945 there was simply not enough time for this necessary and important process. In June 1950, shortly before I completed tenth grade (6. Klasse), we were shocked by the news of the outbreak of the Korean War. Suddenly, to put it bluntly, old Nazis were new partners

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55 Herbert Matis (b.1941), Austrian historian. Herbert Matis, *Die Akademie der Wissenschaften 1938–1945*, in *Akademie der Wissenschaften: Entwicklung einer österreichischen Forschungsinstitution*, ed. Otto Hittmair and Herbert Hunger, Denkschriften der Gesamtakademie 15 (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), 21–34.

in the fight against communism. Another complication was the long time that it took to negotiate the Austrian State Treaty. A saying ascribed to Churchill often circulated—as a completely inadequate attempt to defend, or excuse, our own behavior up until 1945: “We butchered the wrong pig.”

In contrast to the public sphere which was still insecure, I experienced many positive moments at the university. Hugo Hantsch had been imprisoned in Buchenwald in 1938, released a year later, and then had spent the time until 1945 as a parish priest in Ravelsbach, south-east of Maissau. Heinrich Benedikt<sup>56</sup> and Friedrich Engel-Janosi had been persecuted and later returned from their respective exiles in England and the USA. Erich Zöllner, who stayed in Vienna, had been discriminated against but was protected first by Hans Hirsch<sup>57</sup> and later by Leo Santifaller. Santifaller himself was not completely free of suspicion for the time of National Socialism, but he was nominated director of the Austrian State Archives (until 1956) as well as director of the IÖG (until 1962) anyhow. He was dismissed from service in 1946 but reinstated via ministerial directive in the same year. Alphons Lhotsky was anything but a Nazi. But he was also against anything American and anything novel and “Western.” Fichtenau’s position on great empires can be read in his introduction to *The Carolingian Imperium*. According to him, he survived the war because his uncle Fritz Schachermeyr protected him.

**RS:** *If I might ask quite frankly, what about Schachermeyr?*

**HW:** About Fritz Schachermeyr I can only say that we all knew about his former membership in the NSDAP. But I only visited a few of his lectures and this only out of curiosity—he tended to make weird movements with his head while lecturing—and thus never studied under him.

**MAX DIESENBERGER (MD):** *What about the German philologists?*

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<sup>56</sup> Heinrich Benedikt (1886–1981), Austrian historian.

<sup>57</sup> Hans Hirsch (1878–1940), Austrian historian.

**HW:** About that, I can only say from hearsay that the German department had a reputation of being extremely boring. Therefore, I only did one course on German philology. That was Eberhard Kranzmayer's<sup>58</sup> lecture on Middle High German which was compulsory for the *Institutskurs* back then. When Otto Höfler<sup>59</sup> was appointed in 1957, I had already graduated. Now, there is no doubt that Höfler had been a Nazi, but he must have been a charismatic teacher and a good scholar too, if you look at the sheer number of his excellent students, many of whom in turn became renowned professors. I know that this is difficult to understand, and the older I get the less I understand myself how a critical, learned scholar of the humanities can subscribe to a totalitarian and inhuman ideology like this. In other words: the more I try to grasp the situation before 1945, the less I really understand it.

When I am asked how I personally thought about Höfler, I have to refer to my paper in his *Festschrift* of 1968.<sup>60</sup> I critically explored the idea of the Germanic *Sakralkönigtum* (sacred kingship) and, following František Graus<sup>61</sup> and Walter Baetke,<sup>62</sup> specifically rejected the use of Nordic material for the interpretation of sources from the Roman imperial period and the migration era. I was not invited to contribute a second time when Otto Höfler received another *Festschrift* when he turned seventy-five, in 1976. By now I have dismissed the term *Sakralkönigtum* altogether and rather speak of religious functions or duties of the kings.

**WP:** *A follow-up question on Höfler: You said one can be a member of a totalitarian political party and at the same time be an excellent scholar?*

**HW:** Absolutely, and this was not only true between 1933 and 1945.

**WP:** *On the other hand, many of Höfler's works—for example, on Wodan's spear and the Holy Lance—are difficult to understand without knowing*

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58 Eberhard Kranzmayer (1897–1975), Austrian linguist.

59 Otto Höfler (1901–87), Austrian scholar of German studies.

60 Herwig Wolfram, "Methodische Fragen zur Kritik am 'sakralen' Königtum germanischer Stämme," in *Festschrift für Otto Höfler zum 65. Geburtstag*, vol. 2, ed. Helmut Birkhan and Otto Gschwantler (Vienna: Notring, 1968), 473–90.

61 František Graus (1921–89), Czech medievalist.

62 Walter Baetke (1884–1978), German scandinavist and theologian.



*about this political and ideological background. Did you realize this back then or did you slowly come to recognize what the context of these works was?*

**HW:** One could also mention the glorification of male groups (*Männerbünde*) or the identification of Siegfried with Arminius—although this identification was even in 2007 still presented as valid in a documentary on ZDF (German television network). But I would like to answer the question of how I myself thought about it with the example of Reinhard Wenskus. Wenskus was accused, not unjustly, of using ideologically problematic literature in his *Ethnogenesis and Constitution*. But he had no other choice. He wrote his book in the second half of the 1950s, and there simply was little German literature in the field available, except these highly problematic works. However, Wenskus extracted an enormous amount of source texts from them and thus corrected them. His results showed that the formation of peoples cannot be explained by genetic-biological or even racist models, but is the result of an open political, historical, or—more precisely—a constitutional-historical process. In other words, Wenskus actually “denazified” the German literature by using the same sources. An enormous amount of source texts was also conveyed by the Danish historian Vilhelm Grønbech,<sup>63</sup> whose fifth edition of *Culture and Religion of the Germanic Peoples*<sup>64</sup> was edited by Otto Höfler (who also added an introduction to the book), by the Dutch historian Jan de Vries<sup>65</sup> and the radical German nationalist Alfred Dove,<sup>66</sup> as well as by Felix Dahn<sup>67</sup> in his six volumes of *The Kings of the Germanic Peoples: The Character of the Oldest Kingdom of the Germanic Tribes and its History until the Feudal Period*.<sup>68</sup> But their interpretations of the sources have become totally obsolete and are simply wrong.

The problem of how to supersede older patterns of thinking lies, of course, at the heart of all our work. Whether we like it or not, we all start

63 Vilhelm Grønbech (1873–1948), Danish cultural historian.

64 Cf. Wilhelm Grønbech, *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*, ed. Otto Höfler, 2 vols, 10th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987).

65 Jan de Vries (1890–1964), Dutch scholar of German studies.

66 Alfred Dove (1844–1916), German historian.

67 Felix Dahn (1834–1912), German jurist, author, poet, historian.

68 Felix Dahn, *Die Könige der Germanen: Das Wesen des ältesten Königthums der germanischen Stämme und seine Geschichte bis auf die Feudalzeit*, 6 vols (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1861–85).

from a certain traditional basis and then go looking for new paths. However, I always preferred sources over the academic literature that interpreted them. I realized very early that the interpretations in those works were not what I was looking for. I gladly took the advice of the Viennese Hellenist Hans Schwabel,<sup>69</sup> who told me to work with the sources first and then “scatter some appropriate literature on them.” I have also followed František Graus who said—valid then and still today—that if one wants to explore early Slavic history, one should read the existing sources anew and make do without the respective modern literature.

To mention another example: after 1945, Tacitus’s *Germania* was not allowed to be used in Austrian schools. The reason was that the work supposedly talked about the racial purity of the Germanic peoples, an interpretation which had seemed clear to previous generations. If the text c. 2.1 had been read objectively, however, one could have found two reasons for this “German purity” that were quite simple, and which actually refuted racist doctrine. First of all, in classical literature as in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, any immigration occurred by ship. Tacitus held that immigration to Germania was not possible since the ocean had then been a *mare claustrum*, a closed sea. Secondly, he felt that nobody in his right mind had any reason to travel to these dreary lands and mix with their population. So it was new interpretations of source texts which formed and changed my views from those of the beginning of my career—and they still do. Some time ago, at a conference in Germany, a colleague told me: “You used to be more Germanic, Herr Wolfram.”

**WP:** *In this context, one should also mention Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann,<sup>70</sup> on whom Wenskus heavily relied. Mühlmann was appointed by the Nazis to determine if an Umvolkung (i.e., re-Germanization and/or ethnic inversion) would be possible by Germanizing those Slavs who were deemed racially more acceptable. For this they needed the scholarly proof that ethnic identities had been changed in the past, and that consequently a new and better ethnogenesis was possible.*

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69 Hans Schwabel (b.1924).

70 Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann (1904–88), German sociologist and ethnologist.

**HW:** Wenskus only mentions the term “ethnogenesis” in passing, as has already been noted by Ian Wood,<sup>71</sup> and he preferred to use the repelling word “*Umvolkung*.” However, while Mühlmann tried to support ideologically loaded and inhuman policies, Wenskus describes a historical process that has been observed many times in the past. You yourself explained the rapid Slavification of eastern middle Europe with this process. In our *Walchen, Romani und Latini* volume, I analyzed this in the context of the Salzburg area in the eighth century, when the Romance-speaking population started to increasingly abandon their traditional language. But they did not have to become Bavarians, simply because they already had legally been Bavarian for quite a while.<sup>72</sup> This process was a bottom-up one and was not ordered by a Führer, with fatal consequences for anybody who deviated from his order. The term “*Umvolkung*” was used without being aware of how problematic it was until the 1970s, even after Wenskus’s book had been published. Now finally, at least this has become impossible.

**GIUSEPPE ALBERTONI<sup>73</sup> (GA):** *In what way did Wenskus’s Ethnogenesis and Constitution influence your interest in early medieval ethnicity, and how has it had an impact on your further research?*

**HW:** I discovered the book only in the course of my work on the first volume of *Intitulatio*,<sup>74</sup> and found in it an explanation for the merging of the *gentes* from many peoples as a political process largely promoted by

<sup>71</sup> Ian Wood (b.1950), British historian.

<sup>72</sup> Herwig Wolfram, “Die frühmittelalterliche Romania im Donau- und Ostalpenraum” (Early Medieval Romania in the Regions of the Danube and the Eastern Alps), in *Walchen, Romani und Latini: Variationen einer nachrömischen Gruppenbezeichnung zwischen Britannien und dem Balkan* (Walchen, Romani and Latini: Variations of a Post-Roman Group Name between Britannia and the Balkans), ed. Walter Pohl, Ingrid Hartl, and Wolfgang Haubrichs (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Giuseppe Albertoni, now at the University of Trento in Italy, conducted an interview with Herwig Wolfram which was published in Italian, cf. Herwig Wolfram, *Origine: Ricerca dell’origine e dell’identità nell’Alto Medioevo*, ed. Giuseppe Albertoni (“Origine”: Research in the Origin and Identity of the High Middle Ages) (Trento: Università di Trento, 2008); we are grateful for his permission to insert this extract here.

<sup>74</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *Intitulatio I: Lateinische Königs- und Fürstentitel bis zum Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Intitulatio I: Titles of Latin Kings and Princes Until the End of the 8th Century), *MIÖG*: supplemental volume 21 (Graz: Böhlau, 1967).

institutions, as reflected, for instance, in the Vandal royal title *rex Vandalorum et Alanorum*. It also helped me to understand why Charlemagne, from June 5, 774, and throughout the rest of his life, had to mention the Lombards in his royal title, even when he became emperor, unlike the Aquitanians or the Bavarians, who never occur in his title.

My own approach to “ethnogenesis,” and the Viennese school that grew out of it, can be characterized in four points:

(1) We study the ethno-history or historical ethnography of Europe from Late Antiquity to, more or less, the eleventh century. Our aim is thus research on the origin and development of the early peoples of Europe, that is, Romanic, Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic peoples.

(2) We probe into the foundations of ethnic identity, and ask both how “*Wir-Gefühl*” (the feeling of community) and distinction from other identities arise. In the social sciences, identity refers to a potentially explosive mix of self-image, outside perception, and desired ideal. Identity is not something that can be put on somebody like a hat; rather, it is something that an individual has to want and strive for consciously.

(3) We investigate the end of “early peoples” or their transformation into modern nations. Only in the first case does an ethnogenesis ever terminate. As long as an “early people” exists, it changes, and this process continues even when it has turned into a modern nation—to the extent that peoples become homonyms of themselves; for instance, the Bavarians already changed completely between c. 550 and the Late Middle Ages.

(4) We conduct research on the written perception of these processes in the past and present. In short: we try to contribute as historians to the understanding of early European peoples in order to be able to offer narratives that prevent any nationalistic or chauvinistic misuses of the past.

**WP:** *Let us turn to the next big topic: the time of your stay in the USA in 1968–69.*

**HW:** It may be useful to recapitulate my personal history in the years before. A few months after my appointment as assistant professor, on June 1, 1959, my first son, Arnulf, was born; the second son, Chris-

toph, in 1961; and in 1965 our daughter, Burgi. In 1960, my first scholarly publication appeared, and others followed. In 1963 *Splendor Imperii* and in 1967 *Intitulatio I* were published, my first two books. In the winter term of 1964–65, I worked at the Ecole Nationale des Chartes in Paris, and in autumn 1966 I got my habilitation for medieval history and historical auxiliary sciences at the University of Vienna. And then we were off to America.

When talking about America and my stay at the University of California at Los Angeles, I shall have to gratefully light a lot of candles on a lot of graves. I was about thirty-four years old when I accepted a visiting professorship at UCLA, while many of my hosts were much older. In the autumn of 1965, I had already been offered the opportunity of going to LA for \$9,500 in the academic year of 1966–67. But I decided to first do my habilitation and so declined the offer. After my habilitation in 1966 and the publication of my second book in 1967, I received another offer for the academic year 1968–69. I was being classified as “visiting associate professor over scale” and earned \$14,500. This amount was enough to take my entire family with me to Los Angeles. Consider that our family of five paid \$40 for groceries in a week.

American friends of ours had already helped us immensely while we were still preparing our stay in LA. In August 1968, me, my wife Heidi, and our children Arnulf, Christoph, and Burgi (our youngest child, Benedikt, was only born in 1980) took a plane from Vienna to New York. This was just a few days after the Prague Spring had come to an end, and the troops of the Warsaw Pact had invaded Czechoslovakia. We left convinced that we would not return to an Austria occupied by the Russians. At first, we were overwhelmed by all the new impressions we got. Travelling via Huntsville, Alabama, where we stayed with friends, and then Golden, Colorado, close to Denver, I arrived in Los Angeles on September 2, 1968. It was Labor Day. Our home until Easter 1969 was a house which had been designed by the Viennese architect Rudolph Michael Schindler.<sup>75</sup> Since the owners would return from England long before the end of the academic year, we were able to live there at a very cheap rate. We paid \$230, which

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75 Rudolph Michael Schindler (1887–1953), architect.

even if we take inflation into account was still a ridiculously low price for that neighborhood.

The house was located in Greenfield Avenue, just a few steps from Sunset Boulevard and within walking distance from the UCLA campus. This was extremely important because we did not have a car at first. Soon, we got a car thanks to some of my friends, but I still had a problem with the driver's license. While my wife was in the United States on a tourist visa and could therefore drive without a state license, I had to get a California driver's license because I was working there. That was the only exam in my whole life that I did not pass immediately. I failed because of the multiple-choice format of the test and because of it, naturally, being in English. I was unfamiliar with the format, and I still had to adjust to the language. One of the questions was, for example, if I was allowed to run over a pedestrian crossing the street incorrectly. But already on the next day I tried again, completed the test and got the necessary documents. There was, however, a note in my protocol: "parking needs improvement." That was not surprising; the American car that I had bought was enormously big and I still had to get used to it.

**WP:** *What else happened during those first days and weeks in LA?*

**HW:** My family came to LA from Huntsville, where they had stayed with friends. As soon as they arrived, neighbors came to help. That would not have happened in Austria. We were practically the only *Goyim* in a neighborhood full of Jewish immigrants and so we were fortunate enough to get an impression of Vienna during the time between World War I and World War II. There were people among the first generation of immigrants who still had an accent that was even worse than mine. There were also Jewish Americans whose roots were in the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. So we ashamedly experienced what a cultural and spiritual-intellectual treasure Europe and Austria had lost during the 1930s and 1940s, Austria not least because of its own fault. Our daughter was three and a half in the autumn of 1968. With the help of our neighbor she was immediately accepted into the synagogue kindergarten, where she very quickly picked up a lot of

English. Our house was connected to the street by a stairwell. As soon as she went down those stairs, she spoke English, and when came back she started speaking German again. So English was a “language of the stairs” for us at that time.

The boys attended the Bellagio Road School just north of Sunset Boulevard, and there they learned to work independently. It was towards the end of our stay there when I saw that my son, who was not even ten years old at that time, was talking on the phone to someone and wanted me to take the call. He had called United Airlines and asked for background material for his chosen topic of his term paper, “Air travel and industry in California.” The lady who had taken the call wanted to know: “Is this serious?” After I had confirmed it, a huge package was soon delivered, full of materials which Arnulf independently worked with. Back in Vienna, he had a huge advantage because he was used to working on his own.

People who were of tremendous help to us included our neighbors Ruthe and Ken Coleman. They were both from New York. Ken’s mother still spoke Yiddish. Ruthe and Ken did so only under particular circumstances. When parents of the Viennese educated middle-classes of around 1900 had wanted to discuss something that the children were not supposed to understand, they would say “Pas devant les enfants.” Ruthe and Ken used “Nicht for de kinderen.” The Colemans invited us to the bar-mitzvah of one of their four sons, but also helped us by giving advice on where to shop or buy airplane tickets and even where to ski in the mountains.

**WP:** *And what about your teaching activities?*

**HW:** One of our neighbors even came to one of my lectures to make sure that I was understood by my students. When I made a joke and everybody laughed, she was content. This undergraduate lecture course was extremely important for my self-esteem; after all, only the best eleven percent of high school students were accepted. Among them were a lot of Jewish students who knew what “zores” were and what “to speak tacheles” meant. So when I got stuck and did not know how to continue, I said: “Let’s talk tacheles instead of business.” I had to hold



a three-hour lecture course for undergraduates on the Early Middle Ages in the fall quarter and on the late medieval period in the winter quarter. Additionally, I offered a graduate seminar in each of the three quarters but did not have to organize a lecture in the summer quarter. That was not enough for me. So I additionally offered a seminar for seniors who received extra credits when they completed it with excellent results. I remember this seminar, like the graduate seminars, very fondly, although I had completely misunderstood the topic “historiography” that had been assigned to me in the fall. Instead of discussing academic literature on the topic, I held a course on reading and interpreting sources. But nobody minded; actually, the opposite was the case: everybody was very happy about it. In the winter and summer quarters I also held a seminar on diplomatics. Naturally, the students were curious about the young European professor, and I had twelve students attending my seminar. I was once ironically asked: “What are you paying them?” The students were prepared to work hard and also to catch up when they had missed something. One of my students had not learned Latin but knew that reading it was absolutely necessary for diplomatics. He had therefore completed a crash course during the summer and was able to translate and interpret a deed by Charlemagne. In contrast, one of my Austrian students complained in 1969–70 that “you professors don’t even tell us why we should go to university.” Something like this would have been impossible at UCLA. The people there knew what it meant to get an education and they paid for it, and not a small amount either, that is for certain.

Something that helped us academics greatly was the “Sputnik-Shock” which made the Americans spend a lot of money on research and education, out of fear that the Russians would surpass them scientifically and technologically. As a consequence, there was a lot of funding available for research and science, even in the humanities. An example from my personal experience: I borrowed Steffens’s book on paleography,<sup>76</sup> with its many tables, from the UCLA Research Library

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76 Franz Steffens, *Lateinische Paläographie: 125 Tafeln in Lichtdruck mit gegenüberstehender Transkription nebst Erläuterungen und einer systematischen Darstellung der Entwicklung der lateinischen Schrift* (Trier: Schaar & Dathe, 1909).



for my seminar, but then I had to make enough copies for the students. So I went to the Department Secretary, Esther Cohen, who was as generous as she was competent, and she told me, that it would be quite expensive. And I said, well you guys went and got me for a lot more money. I got my copies.

During Christmas break, we flew to Denver and went to Aspen with friends, where we showed off our skiing skills in ice-cold weather. We celebrated Christmas in their cabin in the Mount Vermont Country Club, west of Golden, with a pine tree with real candles, which was actually forbidden. We spent wonderful days in Colorado and went back to LA on December 29. At the airport, I went to drop off our baggage, which included five pairs of skis that each cost \$5. But the guy at the counter said: "No, sir, four days after Christmas—give me five bucks, and that's it." To sum up: we settled in very quickly and very much enjoyed the positive atmosphere. "We need people like you," was something that we were told again and again. Or, as a colleague told me when we were leaving: "You were prepared to get involved."

**WP:** *Who were your most important colleagues at UCLA?*

**HW:** Well, first of all there was Gerhart B. Ladner who had proposed my invitation in the first place. Then there was Lynn T. White Jr.,<sup>77</sup> who pushed my salary through the budget committee. I was his substitute, because he was teaching at Cornell in the academic year 1968–69. White was not universally appreciated as a scholar, but was powerful and irreplaceable as an administrator. He was an excellent head hunter, something which he traced back in dry self-irony to his ancestors who had been "slave drivers" in the South. White was an educated and kind man. Ernst Kantorowicz<sup>78</sup> once said to Ladner that White was the only American colleague to whom he could talk without constantly "relativizing" himself. It was also White who had brought Ladner to Los Angeles in 1963. Up to then, Ladner's academic career had

<sup>77</sup> Lynn T. White Jr. (1907–87), medievalist.

<sup>78</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz (1895–1963), medievalist.

been extremely tedious. Only by repeated fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he wrote his great book *The Idea of Reform*,<sup>79</sup> had his academic career been “saved,” as he put it. With this book Ladner became famous, also outside of academia. Pope John XXIII read it when he prepared the Second Vatican Council. I regarded Ladner as one of my “three fathers.”<sup>80</sup> Together with the Ladners we went to church on Sundays, first to the Church of Saint Martin of Tours at the northern side of Sunset Boulevard, directly opposite from the synagogue kindergarten in Brentwood. One day, Ladner said that he would not go to Saint Martin’s anymore because it was too capitalist for him. So we went to one of the poorer churches to the south, where the Hispanic and Latino population lived. Such a thing was typical of Ladner, who came from the Jewish upper class of Vienna that strongly identified with social commitment. The border between social and socialist was a fuzzy one as, for example, the Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky<sup>81</sup> has proven, who by the way was also an acquaintance of Ladner.

One of the people who were very influential for the human sciences was the “sheik” of the Near Eastern Center, Gustav von Grunebaum,<sup>82</sup> who was a historian of medieval Islam and had been teaching at UCLA since 1949. Gustav von Grunebaum and his wife, Giselle, were Viennese and lived right around the corner from us. Von Grunebaum was more than just polyglot (it was said that he had mastered almost three dozen languages). He was so accomplished as a scholar that he was able to surpass the social barriers that existed between the scholars of the human sciences on the one hand, and those in the medical and legal professions on the other hand, who earned much more money. Those were the professors who lived in big mansions in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, or Bel Air Estates. In addition to von Grunebaum, Ruth

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79 Gerhart Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

80 See the dedication of Herwig Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen: Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*, Siedler Deutsche Geschichte 1 (Berlin: Siedler, 1990): “Meinen drei Vätern – Heinrich von Fichtenau, Gerhart B. Ladner, Friedrich B. Wolfram.”

81 Bruno Kreisky (1911–90), chancellor of Austria (1970–83), member of the SPÖ.

82 Gustav E. von Grunebaum (1909–72), historian.

Mellinkoff<sup>83</sup> was also responsible for building bridges between these two groups. Her husband, David, was a legal expert and an esteemed professor at the law school.

Chair of the Department of History at UCLA was the Russianist Hans Rogger,<sup>84</sup> who had been born in Herford, Westfalen. He was an excellent scholar, critical and demanding in spirit, and a very competent administrator. He was married to an American who played an important role in the staff of some politician. There was also the early modern historian Eugen Weber,<sup>85</sup> who had been born in Bucharest and whom I met, albeit only in passing. Amos Funkenstein's<sup>86</sup> appointment to the university was instigated by Gustav von Grunebaum, not least because of his book *Plan of Salvation and Natural Development: Forms of Determination of the Present in the Historical Thought of the High Middle Ages*;<sup>87</sup> he was still a very young man, only thirty years of age. Amos published and taught in English, German, Hebrew, and French, and he became a big name in Jewish history and generally in the humanities. He was an extremely interesting and highly lively man who unfortunately died far too young, at only fifty-eight. Among the medieval historians, finally, I would like to mention Mary and Richard Rouse.<sup>88</sup> They were about our age and worked in paleography and codicology. Mary was also responsible for many years of successfully publishing the journal *Viator*. The first volume of this scholarly journal, which had been called into existence by Lynn T. White, was published in 1970, and I was allowed to contribute my paper "The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom."<sup>89</sup>

And then there was the Byzantinist Milton V. Anastos<sup>90</sup> who was always kind and who, although not being the greatest scholar himself, owned a vast and important collection of books, a library consisting of

83 Ruth Mellinkoff (1924–2011).

84 Hans Rogger (1923–2002), historian.

85 Eugen Weber (1925–2007), historian.

86 Amos Funkenstein (1937–95), historian of Jewish studies.

87 Amos Funkenstein, *Heilsplan und natürliche Entwicklung: Formen der Gegenwartsbestimmung im Geschichtsdenken des hohen Mittelalters*, Sammlung Dialog 5 (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1965).

88 Richard Rouse (b.1934).

89 Herwig Wolfram, "The Shaping of the Early Medieval Kingdom," *Viator* 1 (1970): 1–20.

90 Milton V. Anastos (1909–97).

many thousands of books. The university had been renewing his contracts because he had promised to leave them his library. However, the University of Notre Dame ended up getting it because they were prepared to pay a million dollars for it. A good friend to me and my entire family was Peter Hanns Reill,<sup>91</sup> who was then preparing the publication of his book on the German Enlightenment and historicism. He was one of the first to use films in his lectures.

**WP:** *What about Henrik and Marianna Birnbaum?*

**HW:** Henrik<sup>92</sup> and Marianna Birnbaum<sup>93</sup> were more than just friends. Henrik was an eminent authority, a professor of Slavic languages and literature with a focus on the medieval era; but he also studied modern and post-modern literature. Marianna was originally from Hungary, and she is now professor emeritus and an excellent literary scholar focused on Hungarian literature. Henrik and his brother Karl<sup>94</sup> were sons of the first marriage of Immanuel Birnbaum,<sup>95</sup> who was an esteemed journalist. They had been born in Breslau, went to Warsaw in 1927 and then fled via Estonia and Finland to Sweden, just in time before September 1, 1939. They spoke all three languages equally well. While Karl stayed in Sweden and became a politologist, Henrik went to the United States and had been teaching at UCLA since 1961. I tried to support him when he wanted to install a UCLA branch at Vienna. Our former president of the University of Vienna, Georg Winckler,<sup>96</sup> whom I met on this occasion, also supported this project but alas, it failed mainly because of the Austrian legal situation at the time. Henrik and Marianna later were much involved in the Central European University in Budapest, where Henrik was the chairman of the Academic Board of the Department of Medieval Studies for some time. I will be forever grateful to both Henrik and Marianna.

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91 Peter Hanns Reill (b.1938).

92 Henrik Birnbaum (1925–2002).

93 Marianna Birnbaum (b.1934).

94 Karl Birnbaum (1924–2012).

95 Immanuel Birnbaum (1894–1982).

96 Georg Winckler (b.1943), principal of the University of Vienna (1999–2011).

**WP:** *For the United States and also for California, 1968–69 was an important year in more than one regard. How much did you concern yourself with these developments and what did you think about them?*

**HW:** Well, there were offshoots of the free speech movement in Berkeley that had only arrived at UCLA in spring 1969. That was the time when Californian governor Ronald Reagan visited our campus, and there were demonstrations, in the course of which students even stormed the administration building where he was staying. Among other things, they poured maple syrup onto a filing cabinet, which was a very powerful anti-bureaucracy statement but did not really have any consequences. I mingled with the demonstrating students, but the events were not really discussed in the lectures. Among my graduate students there was one who was very committed to social work, but for him the aftermath of the Watts Riots of 1965 was much more important than the Berkeley students' movement. There was also a student who was very committed to the fate of the Latino and Hispanic population. But these were all individual actions.

One big and sad topic was, of course, the war in Vietnam. But here also, mostly, we were touched by it via individual stories and not via demonstrations in the streets or discussions in the classroom. Friends told me: "We just got our brother's death notice." Others told me that their nephew had died. Once we took the children to an event where a student would sing songs for children against the war. However, there was one protest that was apparent across the whole campus. There was a Turkologist who was denying the Armenian genocide. There was a massive students' demonstration against him, with signs saying, "Kill XY!" However, neither I nor my lectures were touched by this either. People knew that I was against the Vietnam War just like them, and the horrible fate of the Armenians in 1915 was perceived to have nothing to do with either myself as a person or as a scholar.

**WP:** *How did you experience reflections of the past about exile, persecution, and war in the immigrant milieu with which you were in close contact?*

**HW:** In this regard, I remember one conversation very clearly, another

scene which I still gratefully recall. Ladner categorically denied the assumption of collective guilt. One day, Ladner offered me the amicable “*Du*” (German personal address, as opposed to the much more formal “*Sie*”), and he explained: “I know where you come from, but I have also seen how you deal with it.” For me, that was almost like being knighted. Ladner certainly, but probably also others, had looked into my background before I was invited to join them at UCLA. So I had been invited to speak to Otto Pächt,<sup>97</sup> an art historian who had taught at Oxford during the Nazi period and who had been at Princeton in 1960, together with Ladner. This conversation was initiated by Ladner. This way, the people at UCLA knew what they could expect from me and did not really talk to me about things that were self-evident to them.

**WP:** *How about the internal political situation in the USA? What I am interested in is if the events of the time were reflected on and discussed, or if you instead just lived in an ivory tower.*

**HW:** When we arrived in LA, Robert Kennedy’s assassination had taken place not quite three months previously, and so it was present everywhere we went. The never-ending Vietnam War split the society deeply. The Watts Riots of 1965 and their aftermath were still talked about a lot, even three years after they had taken place. When you drove eastwards from LA and entered areas that could not possibly be more desolate, it was usually an Indian reservation. However, the Navajos at the Grand Canyon in Arizona had their own police force and also their own timekeeping and were treated with respect by the “Caucasians,” as I have witnessed myself. At the beginning of November 1968, the presidential election took place. The two most important candidates were the Republican Richard Nixon and the Democrat Hubert Humphrey. My eldest son had a mock election at his school and the students had to canvas for both politicians and then consequently vote for either one or the other. When Arnulf came home, he told us that he had voted for Humphrey. And why? Because his classmate had convinced him that, should Nixon be elected president, they

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<sup>97</sup> Otto Pächt (1902–88), Austrian art historian.

would have to go to school on Saturdays. The ten-year-olds discussed in school what they had heard at home, and our neighborhood was Democrat through and through.

**WP:** *How did you meet Patrick Geary?*<sup>98</sup>

**HW:** Besides UCLA, my activities at the University of Colorado at Boulder were also of great importance to me. The contact was made by Mr. and Mrs. Lepinsky,<sup>99</sup> both musicians who had spent the academic year of 1967–68 in Vienna. They introduced us to Georges Barany,<sup>100</sup> a Hungarian who taught at Denver. He had fled from Hungary in 1956 and had been met with such kindness in Austria that he was prepared to help any Austrian, and so he also helped me. He, in turn, introduced me to Howard Kaminsky,<sup>101</sup> who invited me to hold a guest lecture in Seattle in 1969 and then at Florida State University in 1985. The Lepinskys were also responsible for my meeting with Boyd Hill from the University of Colorado at Boulder. And Boyd invited me to co-organize and hold a seminar on historical auxiliary sciences in the summer of 1971. As with the seminar at UCLA, I was responsible for the part on diplomatics. And so, at the end of June 1971, I became visiting full professor and director of the Summer Institute for Basic Historical Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In the first session there was a young man in the classroom who knew more, was more interested, and spoke more languages than the other students (they were themselves excellent participants whom I once praised, not quite correctly, as “cream of the crap,” instead of “cream of the crop”). This twenty-three-year old graduate student came from Yale and was called Patrick Joseph Geary.<sup>102</sup> He had studied with the internationally known economic historian and medievalist Roberto S. Lopez,<sup>103</sup> who once visited us in Colorado. The friendship with Pat-

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98 Patrick J. Geary (b.1948), US-American medievalist.

99 Jerry Lepinsky (1930–2009) and Martha Lepinsky (b.1934).

100 Georges Barany (1922–2001).

101 Howard Kaminsky (1925–2014), US-American publisher, author, and film producer.

102 Patrick Joseph Geary (b.1948), historian.

103 Roberto S. Lopez (1910–86), economic historian and medievalist.

rick Geary is one of the most treasured things that I brought back from the United States.

**WP:** *What else did you bring back from the USA to Austria?*

**HW:** Well, what indeed? The most significant souvenir from UCLA was the immediate wish to return to the United States, which was fulfilled in 1971; furthermore, the plan to expand the methodological recognition and representation of Late Antiquity and the early medieval era as a unit and as an independent discipline; thirdly, the ability to publish in English; and then, last but truly not least, the introduction of block seminar courses. The model for it came from the seminars of Ladner and Rogger, but I adapted it to fit our needs in Vienna. The following thoughts stood behind it: a Ph.D. thesis should be fit to be published as a book, the MA thesis should correspond to a longer research article, and a seminar paper should be equivalent to a conference paper. So we organized the seminar like an academic conference that lasted for a few days, with the appropriate preparations, a timely distribution of research topics, and monitoring of the progress of contributors. Consequently, we met our students several times before the seminar started. And just as the host institution has to cover travel expenses and accommodation for conference participants, we also had to take care of these matters if the seminar was to be held anywhere other than at the university. Taking the seminar to a place far from the hub, into the “wilderness,” is important because it reinforces the feeling of being a team and encourages informal interaction between seminar participants as well as between the professor and his students, which is essential for the success of the seminar. We often received funding from the cultural section of the government of Lower Austria because most of the seminars took place at Zwettl or elsewhere in Lower Austria. But we also went to Salzburg, Carinthia, Vorarlberg, and Burgenland.

An indirect, but important consequence of my activities in the United States was an invitation to visit several British universities in 1980. Among them was Leeds, where I got to know a young lecturer named Ian Wood. This was the beginning of a friendship and of a very fruitful



cooperation in early medieval studies between Leeds and Vienna; not least, in the context of the European Science Foundation Programme on “The Transformation of the Roman World” in the 1990s.

**WP:** *What effect did your repeated stays in the United States have on your scholarly work?*

**HW:** Already in 1970, I had published my first paper in English. After reading it, Fichtenau said: “From now on I will read Wolfram only in English; he expresses his ideas much more clearly.” The English that I had acquired also gave me the opportunity of taking an active part in the translation process of three of my books: *History of the Goths*,<sup>104</sup> *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*,<sup>105</sup> and finally, *Konrad II, 990–1039: Emperor of Three Kingdoms*.<sup>106</sup>

**WP:** *How did you keep in touch with United States academia?*

**HW:** Between 1971 and 2006 I returned to the United States every few years as a visiting professor or lecturer. In the course of my visits I was introduced to some of the best but also some of the most entertaining universities, such as the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, which had been named after a Native American chief. Here, I was presented with the “real”—the Confederate—flag, and I was instructed that “the war” was neither World War I nor World War II, neither the Korean nor Vietnam War, but the American Civil War. Sometimes the most amusing events started already at the airport. In 1992, I was invited to a conference on Attila, and after the immigration officer saw my papers he asked me: “Are you familiar with this guy?” Because I was also

104 Herwig Wolfram, *Geschichte der Goten: Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts—Entwurf einer historischen Ethnographie* (Munich: Beck, 1979); English edition: Wolfram Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. Dunlop Thomas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

105 Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

106 Herwig Wolfram, *Konrad II: 990–1039 – Kaiser dreier Reiche* (Munich: Beck, 2000); English edition: Herwig Wolfram, *Konrad II, 990–1039: Emperor of Three Kingdoms*, trans. Denise A. Kaiser (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

repeatedly invited to speak in countries behind the Iron Curtain, an immigration officer at the Chicago airport once questioned me: “Man, come on! What are you doing in those countries?” And because that was what I had been told shortly before by a Hungarian friend, I quickly replied: “Providing hope!” A short, “Oh, go ahead, sir,” was the end of this interrogation. On April 24, 1987, I acted as plenary speaker at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in Toronto, and then I was elected corresponding fellow of the Medieval Academy of America on April 5, 1990.

**WP:** *How did you experience your return to Austria and to the University of Vienna?*

**HW:** Already while on the airplane from London Heathrow to Vienna in June 1969, I had read in the papers that Alois Mock,<sup>107</sup> whom I had met in Paris in 1964–65, was our new minister of education. He followed Piffl-Perčević, who had stepped down because his own party had disavowed him when it came to the question of the thirteenth compulsory year in school. First, the ÖVP had unanimously demanded the introduction of the compulsory thirteenth year. Then, after a popular initiative which resulted in about 340,000 signatures against it, the party switched course. With this, also, the Raacher Hochschulrat was gone. Mock, who signed the appointment decree which made me a professor, tried to initiate some reforms. But he did not have much time because on March 1, 1970, the era of Bruno Kreisky’s Social Democratic government began.

When I returned to the IÖG in June 1969, the only one who was really glad to see me was Heinrich Fichtenau, while my friend Herbert Paulhart,<sup>108</sup> the then librarian of the IÖG, quickly told me: “Watch out, don’t tell anybody that you were gone and don’t tell anybody anything from over there. People are not interested in this kind of things and if they are interested, they will envy you, above all, because you came back a professor and will soon also be one here.”

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<sup>107</sup> Alois Mock (1934–2017), vice-chancellor of Austria (1987–89), minister of education, foreign minister, member of the ÖVP.

<sup>108</sup> Herbert Paulhart (1926–2010), Austrian historian.

My newly installed Viennese professorship, which I had already been awarded in the fall of 1969, was then actually considered a scandal by many of my colleagues, and news spread that it was only a personal professorship, as existed in Germany at the time. In fact, I had gone through official channels in order to initiate the establishment of a new associate professorship at the beginning of 1968. I did so mainly to support the two full professors who were under a lot of pressure because of the large increase in number of students and the time-consuming and intensive work that the lecture courses at the IÖG had become. I can honestly claim that I did not consider myself to be a candidate before my appointment at UCLA. However, only a short while before my stay in the United States, I was assured by Fichtenau as well as a high ministerial official that they would try to make sure that I would be able to return to Vienna as professor.

While the events of 1968–69 had hardly touched upon my work at UCLA, I now found myself right in the middle of them, or rather in-between. For most of my older colleagues I was considered too young and inexperienced. And the students, who had become part of the '68-movement a little later in Austria, considered me to be a part of the establishment. This form of standing between the lines can also be understood in the physical sense: During one of the first faculty meetings that I attended in spring 1970, a group of students tried to break into the meeting room. Alerted by the faculty secretary, my colleague Preisinger and I practically jumped in front of the door and prevented the students from entering. The summer term of 1970 was an especially difficult time. It was, as Ernst Hanisch<sup>109</sup> noted, once again also a rebellion of the provinces against Vienna. During June 1970, I suffered from insomnia.

After the new university laws had been passed in 1971, I was asked by my colleagues to organize the implementation of and get the approval for the new study regulations and curricula by the ministry. In doing so, I was supported greatly by Karl Brunner. However, at first, the atmosphere was heated. Instead of thirty-two compulsory hours, we proposed only twenty-eight, because I have always believed that

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<sup>109</sup> Ernst Hanisch (b.1940), Austrian historian.

the outcome of a completed history university course should be a scholarly literary product fit for publication instead of a collection of as many exam certificates as possible. When we presented our plans in lecture hall 41, a group of students shouted that twenty-eight hours would be more than thirty-two hours. Back then I almost threw in the towel, but I ended up rising up to the challenge.

When I look back at this crisis now, I realize how important it was back then. Willy Brandt's Warsaw genuflection was similarly important, as was the Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky's public statement that many Austrians had indeed supported the Nazis and therefore had had a part in what had happened.<sup>110</sup> Another important step was the Waldheim scandal, which also achieved some sort of inner catharsis of Austrian postwar society. The Bible is right with stating that scandal is necessary—but woe to the one who starts it.

**WP:** *This leads to the question of the role of medieval history for contemporary society. In your lifetime, the demand for societal relevance of historical research has come from very different sides. For example, in 1938 Otto Brunner published an article in the Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (further MIÖG; Announcements of the Institute of Austrian Historical Research) on the role of the IÖG in the new German Reich. He praised the achievements of the historical research pursued at the institute but criticized its purely positivist stance, arguing that historical scholarship should fulfill its "pan-German commitment."<sup>111</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, the demand for the social relevance of the historical disciplines was put forward by the radical Left. And, finally, in recent years, the call to meet the great societal questions and challenges has come from a rather neo-liberal background, and is also promoted by the EU bureaucracy. Research should only receive public funding if it can give back something in return, such as providing new technologies, advancing the economy, dealing with social problems and*

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<sup>110</sup> Willy Brandt (1913–92), German politician; Franz Vranitzky (b.1937), chancellor of Austria (1986–97), member of the SPÖ.

<sup>111</sup> "Gesamtdeutsche Verpflichtung"; Otto Brunner, "Das österreichische Institut für Geschichtsforschung und seine Stellung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft," *MIÖG* 52 (1938): 416.

*inequalities, or at least offering infotainment. It is not an unreasonable demand, but it also risks disempowering us from the decision of what kind of research we do, and when the time is ripe to communicate the results to a wider public. That is a challenge that medieval studies also have to answer to. What is your answer to the question? How can we find a balance between the freedom of our research and the need to cater for public needs and interests? And how can we show that medieval history is indeed a relevant field of research?*

**HW:** My inaugural lecture, which I held on March 9, 1970, was titled “The Relevance (*Aktualität*) of Medieval History.” I spoke on the same topic in Zagreb in 1971, and in 1972 this paper was published in the Festschrift dedicated to Walther Kraus. I cited one of my students who once said: “It is not important for the beginner or the outsider if they are being introduced to historical research by a Medievalist or an Early Modern historian, as long as they are being treated with commitment and respect.” I commented: “I see this commitment as a serious but equal and, therefore, brotherly dialogue on three levels: first, an interpreting one with the people of the past; secondly, a mediating one with the people of tradition; and thirdly, with the people of the present summing up the first two dialogues.” These maxims explain the dictum that medieval history, like any other epochal history, is always contemporary history.<sup>112</sup> This idea also opens up the possibility of historians of different opinions and political, religious, or national backgrounds having a genuine scholarly discourse. And this discourse extends the *condition humaine* of contemporaries, providing the human complement, perhaps even regulation, for sciences and engineering. This discourse, therefore, is useful and relevant.

Additionally, there is the question of contents, something which could interest two different “publics.” I have tried to find answers to this question in two different fields of my research that are mutually dependent and complement each other. First of all, I wanted to explore the histories of peoples, or in other words, of the bearers of certain ethnic names who came from the “outer world,” who crossed the imperial

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<sup>112</sup> According to Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), Italian humanist scholar.

borders, and established states on Roman soil: the Goths, the Franks, and the Longobards. And secondly, it was the history of an area that interested me; an area that would turn from former provinces of the Roman Empire into a new homeland for “kings and peoples” and thus became a new, politically structured region. With the books on the Goths, I explored one question, with the books on Austrian history before Austria came into being, the other. You yourself took a similar journey with the Avars and the Carpathian peoples. Helmut Reimitz<sup>113</sup> was brought to Princeton by his Franks.

These are examples for the first question which, when explored with the necessary commitment and also the required talent, can lead young and not so young historians onto international grounds. Although Fichtenau rather avoided the second path, I soon realized, during the first Viennese seminars and lectures in Austrian provinces, that it can arouse great interest with academic as well as non-academic audiences. Concerning this, a recent experience: the cultural editor of the newspaper *Salzburger Nachrichten* interviewed me twice; one time it was on Charlemagne and the article was published on the 1,200th anniversary of his death on January 28, 2014,<sup>114</sup> and the other was on the Bavarian Duke Tassilo III (748–88) and his scandalous trial on July 6, 788.<sup>115</sup> While the interview on Charlemagne did not evoke any particular reaction from the public, the editor was even approached on the streets of Salzburg because of the Tassilo interview, and there were many letters to the editor. Another example: *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum: The White Book of the Salzburg Church about the Successful Mission in Carantania and Pannonia*,<sup>116</sup> a book that I wrote at the suggestion of Peter Štih,<sup>117</sup> was published in 2012 in Ljubljana/Lai-bach, and after about a year it was sold out. So it was re-printed with

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<sup>113</sup> Helmut Reimitz (b.1965), Austrian medievalist.

<sup>114</sup> Hedwig Kainberger, “Er brachte Münzen, Schrift und Bücher,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 28 January 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Hedwig Kainberger, “Großes Griss um den Schatz Tassilos,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 05 July 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum: Das Weißbuch der Salzburger Kirche über die erfolgreiche Mission in Karantanien und Pannonien*, Dela. Slovenska Akademija Znanosti in Umetnosti 38 (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Peter Štih (b.1960), Slovenian medievalist.

some minor changes and is still a great success, apparently because it renders an early medieval history of an area and then relates it to supra-regional developments. To sum up: the historian's task is to offer scholarly, reliable answers to the questions of the people: Where do we come from, how have we become what we are, and where are we situated in an open process? The answers cannot claim any absolute validity, precisely because of their scholarly basis.

**WP:** *During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s you also published some books that were very widely received.*

**HW:** In 1979, I published the *History of the Goths*, which was reprinted in 1990 after a thorough reworking that included over one hundred additional pages and a new, simplified title: *The Goths*.<sup>118</sup> In the same year, I published *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples* with Siedler (Berlin). Both books were translated into English and published by University of California Press in 1988 and 1997, respectively. Wolf Jobst Siedler<sup>119</sup> was the only “real” publisher I have ever met. He read and corrected all the manuscripts he planned to publish, and he also held regular correspondence with the authors. I say this even though I have been a content and even proud author for C. H. Beck, Munich, for a long time and then have worked with Ueberreuter, Vienna, for almost two decades on the edition of the *Austrian History*.

**WP:** *Your scholarly work was always accompanied but also hindered by your acceptance of positions in the academic administration and other official responsibilities.*

**HW:** This started when I became a member of the study committee soon after 1970. After we had started our work, the conflicts between the three curiae—the professors, the non-professorial teaching staff, and the students—became more ordered. In June of 1980, I was elected as

<sup>118</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *Die Goten: Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts – Entwurf einer historischen Ethnographie*, rev. 3rd ed., (Munich: Beck, 1990).

<sup>119</sup> Wolf Jobst Siedler (1926–2013), German publisher and writer.

dean, though there was some resistance to my promotion to this position. However, I was dean for only one period of office (1981–83) because on October 1, 1983, I became director of the IÖG, which was of much more importance to me than any other administrative function. The beginning of my term of office was, however, seriously disturbed by the refurbishment of the offices and lecture halls of the institute. To keep up the teaching and research activities under these circumstances was indeed a challenge. Then I started working with the Austrian Academy of Sciences, although I did not get on very well with its president, Herbert Hunger.<sup>120</sup> Although I was elected as a corresponding fellow of the Austrian Academy of Sciences at the age of forty-two, I had to wait another nine years before I was chosen to be a fellow in 1985. Only one year after my election as a corresponding fellow I became vice-chairman in 1977 and in 1983 chairman of the committee for early medieval studies at the Academy. This allowed me, from 1978 onwards, to organize the international and interdisciplinary conferences at the Cistercian monastery of Zwettl, to publish their results and, consequently, to establish early medieval research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. In the beginning, the committee did not have any salaried employees, until you were hired in 1990, soon after your habilitation. This was the first step in the development of today's Institute for Medieval Studies, which was only possible because of the initiative and unfailing support of Herwig Friesinger, who was then the secretary general of the academy.<sup>121</sup>

**WP:** *The exhibition on the Kuenringers, a powerful late medieval family in northern Lower Austria, a Landesausstellung funded by the Lower Austrian administration, also took place at Zwettl.*

**HW:** Correct, in 1981. Already in the mid-seventies I was asked during a seminar there if I was prepared to organize an exhibition on the Kuenringers, the noble family that had founded the Cistercian monastery of Zwettl, but who also had a bad reputation for being robber

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<sup>120</sup> Herbert Hunger (1914–2000), president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (1973–82).

<sup>121</sup> Herwig Friesinger (b.1942), Austrian archaeologist.



barons. Back then I denied this request, mainly because I thought that I knew nothing about organizing an exhibition. Then we did not hear anything for a long time, until one day an official of the cultural department of the Lower Austrian regional administration visited me at the IÖG and repeated this request. There was a reason why they proposed it at that moment: the socialist opposition in the Lower Austrian provincial parliament had accused the conservative majority of using methods similar to those of the Kuenringers to get their way in some affairs. I was told that Andreas Maurer,<sup>122</sup> governor of Lower Austria, then said something like: "Well, let's organize an exhibition. We will show you what good the Kuenringers really did for the formation of this country." The decision to use a cultural-historical exhibition as a political argument, was not least based on the extraordinary success that the Babenberger exhibition at the Cistercian monastery of Lilienfeld had had in 1976. I asked if there were no other historians, namely ones that were experts in Austrian history, who were better suited for this project than me. The answer to this objection was that they had asked everybody in the discipline, and they had all declined. Some of them had reasoned that there were no objects left that had a connection to the Kuenringers, except a part of the grave of Hadmar II, which was by then a built-in part high up in the baroque church tower.

Finally, I accepted the request and together with Karl Brunner and Falko Daim,<sup>123</sup> who was Friesinger's assistant at the Viennese Institute for Prehistorical Archaeology at the time, I started working on it. Without them, the exhibition would not have taken place or at least would not have become such a success. They called together and coordinated a team of over one hundred scholars. I opted for interfering as little as possible and concentrated on presenting the project to the outside world. However, I was always aware that it was completely my responsibility if the exhibition should fail, a fact that Governor Maurer would not let me forget. One time he told me: "If there will be 100,000 visitors it's fine, but if there will be less than 50,000 then you are going

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<sup>122</sup> Andreas Maurer (1919–2010), governor of Lower Austria (1966–81), member of the ÖVP.

<sup>123</sup> Falko Daim (b.1952), Austrian archaeologist.

to have a problem, Herr Professor.” In the end, almost 400,000 people visited the exhibition, almost as many as at Lilienfeld in 1976. At Whitsun in 1981, almost 7,000 people went through it. Although it only took about one and a half hours to get to Zwettl from Vienna or Linz, the area was largely unknown. Because of this apparent seclusion, the exhibition was originally to take place at Dürnstein in the Wachau valley. But Prelate Ferdinand Gießauf,<sup>124</sup> who was abbot of the Cistercian monastery at Zwettl, vehemently and successfully protested against this idea: “No way, this is our topic!”

The exhibition was opened in the presence of the Austrian president Rudolf Kirchschläger,<sup>125</sup> and after that, I gave him a guided tour. And then, something terrible happened. In the summer of 1980, I had gone to South Tyrol to visit some owners of castles to ask them if they could contribute any objects to our exhibition. I also visited Churburg Castle and the Counts Trapp. Oswald Trapp, Count of Matsch, at the time (North) Tyrolean county curator, had an idea: in 1950, the Trapp family tomb in the parish church of Schluderns had been opened. Three heavily corroded pieces of swords were found which had been given as burial objects to the grandfather (d.1533), father (d.1558), and son Jakob Trapp (d.1563), together with a small ring with a snake on it that bit itself in its tail—a symbol of eternity. Count Oswald suggested that the sword piece that had been best preserved and the ring would be given to us for the exhibition. However, he wanted to bring them to Austria with as little fuss as possible; to get the necessary papers from the responsible authorities at Verona would have probably taken until my retirement. So the two artifacts came to Zwettl. Before the opening, I had taken a quick inspection tour through the exhibition, and both the sword and the ring were in place. But when we took Kirchschläger on a tour of the exhibition, the ring was gone. The following weekend I do not remember fondly. But since I could give important information on the time when the object had disappeared, the police soon caught the perpetrator, and so the ring returned to its place in the exhibition and can now be seen in one of the exhibition rooms at the *Churburg*.

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<sup>124</sup> Ferdinand Gießauf (1913–85), abbot of Zwettl (1961–80).

<sup>125</sup> Rudolf Kirchschläger (1915–2000), president of Austria (1974–86).

**WP:** *When we talk about Zwettl, which was close to the Iron Curtain, it gets me thinking about the Cold War. So firstly, I would like to know how the situation influenced your daily life, how people thought and talked about it. And secondly, how did you manage to bridge the Iron Curtain as a scholar?*

**HW:** At first, the division into East and West and the Cold War were things that I had accepted as a fact in the years after 1945. However, very soon I thought it necessary to do something so that our neighbors would not be entirely forgotten. Already in the fall of 1956 I had an opportunity to act. While I was writing my dissertation, the people's uprising of 1956 took place in Hungary, which was brutally suppressed by the Soviets. During this time, I suspended working on my thesis and, together with my future wife Heidi, I helped to collect and organize donations. In those days we were on the move a lot, and what we witnessed made us proud of our fellow Austrians as well as of official Austria. The Hungarians that had fled were welcomed warmly; they were offered help generously, only a year after Austria had got its full independence. Maybe that was one of the reasons for the Austrian generosity.

In the following years the situation normalized, and I found possibilities both in scholarly exchange and as a national of a neutral state. To understand the background of the scholarly context, it should be noted: because the Soviet historians could not prove that the Roman Empire had fallen because of a slave uprising and a class struggle, as it should have done according to Historical Materialism, Stalin took the research on the Early Middle Ages away from historians and relied on archaeologists instead. This might seem peculiar today, but its ultimate consequence was that most of our academic partners were archaeologists. Herwig Friesinger and Falko Daim, both archaeologists, were indispensable as mediators at that time.

The Czech archaeologists, first and foremost Josef Poulík,<sup>126</sup> created a stir during the 1950s with their exceptional excavations in southern Moravia and their accurate scholarly interpretations. At the same time, they provided a seemingly reliable basis for the political claims

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<sup>126</sup> Josef Poulík (1910–98), Czech archaeologist.

that the Great Moravian Realm had been the “first common state of Czechs and Slovaks.” In 1963, the 1,100th anniversary of the arrival of Constantine-Cyrill and Methodius was celebrated. These two brothers were raised in bilingual (Greek and Slavonic) Thessaloniki and were sent out by Emperor Michael III to “teach” Christianity to the Moravians, after the Moravian prince Rastislav and his nephew Zwentibald (Svatopluk) had contacted Constantinople. The Czech authorities took the opportunity of this anniversary to publicize their view of the events. We Viennese historians were also invited to the big exhibition they had staged, and thus, in 1963, I crossed the Iron Curtain for the first time. We saw Mikulčice and the foundations of the twelve churches found there, the manor house of Pohansko, and, finally, Brno, where the big exhibition took place. Before we left we were given a meal at a self-service restaurant. When we were in line, we talked to each other quietly and a man behind us asked from which city of the GDR (German Democratic Republic, Eastern Germany) we came. When we answered, “From Vienna,” the man said, “*Ježišmaria*, from Vienna?!” A visit from Vienna, which is only about one hundred kilometers from Brno, was not a frequent sight back then.

The International Historical Congress of 1965 in Vienna not only allowed me to meet Gerhart Ladner, for which I am still grateful, but also provided the basis for my life-long friendship with Prague historian Pavel Spunar,<sup>127</sup> the *fidelis et antiquissimus amicorum Bohemorum*. And that happened like this: Our Czech and Slovak colleagues came to Vienna by a ship that anchored in the Danube and where they slept and ate during the conference. This was far from the city center. But they did not receive a penny of Western money, which meant that Pavel—who was and still is a good walker, thank God—had to walk to the university and all the other places where the conference took place every day. When I realized this, I gave him streetcar tickets for the rest of the conference. We started talking, and he told me that he would very much like to work as a paleographer in Vienna for a longer period of time. I managed to get him a scholarship so that he could make abundant use of the National Library in 1966–67. During all the difficult

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<sup>127</sup> Pavel Spunar (b.1928), Czech historian.

times that would follow I could still repeatedly invite him to Vienna and visit him in Prague, where I also met other Czech colleagues.

**WP:** *What role did Zwettl have in those activities?*

**HW:** Because the *Bildungshaus Zwettl*<sup>128</sup> was well suited for our purposes, we held the international conferences of the Academy Committee for Early Medieval Studies there from 1978. We invited scholars from almost all Eastern European states. In 1977, I had visited Romania with my wife, supported by the academy's exchange program. I had given papers in Bucharest, Iași, and Cluj/Klausenburg and so, as a "friend to the Romanian people," I could bring a number of Romanian colleagues to Zwettl. Thus, Central European medieval studies contributed just a little bit to perforating the Iron Curtain.

The topic of the *Regnum Maravorum* in the ninth century had occupied my mind since 1963 although my studies on the *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* during the 1970s had somehow diverted my attention. In both cases it was essential to adopt a certain attitude towards the colleagues on the other side of the Iron Curtain, some of which were to become students and many of which were to become friends. Their research goals and results were to be taken seriously, while their ideological basis could not be criticized or even attacked. It would not have been fair; they were under a lot of pressure. The GDR historian Eckhard Müller-Mertens<sup>129</sup> dutifully condemned the bourgeois author W. Herwig in the introduction to his excellent book *Regnum Teutonicum: Origin and Dissemination of the German Perception of Reich and King*<sup>130</sup> while praising a certain H. Wolfram and his progressive work about one hundred pages later. It was convenient that my surname could also be understood as a first name and the other way around.

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<sup>128</sup> *Bildungshaus Zwettl*: the monastery of Zwettl which provides rooms and staff for educational activities of any kind and also hosts scholarly conferences.

<sup>129</sup> Eckhard Müller-Mertens (1923–2015), German historian.

<sup>130</sup> Eckhard Müller-Mertens, *Regnum Teutonicum: Aufkommen und Verbreitung der deutschen Reichs- und Königsauffassung im früheren Mittelalter*, Forschungen zur mittelalterlichen Geschichte 15 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1970).

In any case, our reply to this delicate situation was to attempt cautious interpretation that stayed close to the sources. By meeting our colleagues at eye-level, trust and cooperation slowly built up, as indicated by the Zwettl conferences in 1978, 1982, and 1986. In 1989, I was invited by Bogo Grafenauer<sup>131</sup> to give a talk on the *Conversio* at the University of Ljubljana. That was also about the time when the decision was made to allow Peter Štih and his colleague Dušan Kos<sup>132</sup> to attend a three-year training syllabus in historical auxiliary sciences, the *Kurs*, at the *Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*. The cooperation with our Polish and Hungarian colleagues developed almost without problems in the 1980s.

For the Czechs, the national monument at Mikulčice was like a magic door opener even at the worst times of normalization. Towards the end of the summer semester of 1970, I planned a one-day excursion to South Moravia with my students. We had to show our passports at the border at Mikulov/Nikolsburg and had to fill in a form for a one-day-visit. That was the moment that Karl Brunner realized that he had forgotten to bring his passport. What to do? When the Czech lieutenant learned where we were headed, he allowed Brunner to cross the border, but we had to be back by 4:00 p.m. because that was when his shift ended.

Then, 1989 came along and with it the *Wende*, the implosion of the Soviet empire. If we are honest, we will admit that nobody had seen it coming. Long before 1989 we had good connections to many colleagues and friends in the East, some of whom had been persecuted and removed from their positions. On many occasions we noticed that the regime had lost its credibility; the people did not even believe in the weather forecast anymore. But because the Soviet tanks posed an ever-visible reminder of the power of the regime, nobody expected the end of it. When it did happen, I experienced a second 1955, a time of liberation and hope and a very happy time of my life. Coincidentally, we were on an excursion in Prague in September 1989 and looked down from the Hradčany Castle on the West German embassy where GDR citizens crowded. Soon after the fall of the Iron Curtain I was invited to some of the liberated countries to tes-

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<sup>131</sup> Bogo Grafenauer (1916–95), Slovenian historian.

<sup>132</sup> Dušan Kos (b.1963), Slovenian historian.

tify on behalf of my colleagues and friends that they had always practiced “good” and ideologically unbiased scholarship. So I could do my part in ensuring that they could either return to their positions, keep them, or even be promoted. With the support of several Austrian institutions, among them the University of Vienna and the Academy of Sciences, it was possible to fund book acquisitions for some of the “Eastern” institutes. We were hoping that students from the newly formed democracies would complete the *Kurs* at the IÖG, and so it happened, especially students from the universities of Bratislava and Ljubljana. Thus, Peter Štih is the only Slovenian full professor for medieval history, while Juraj Šedivý<sup>133</sup> went on to have a successful career at Komenský University.

**WP:** *It was around the time of the transformation of Eastern Europe that you started editing the fifteen-volume work Austrian History, the most ambitious and comprehensive history of Austria since at least the beginning of the Republic. In which context did you decide to embark on this project? A history of Austria is a difficult task because the name “Austria”/“Österreich” has fundamentally changed its significance and its territorial shape in history, not least in the course of the twentieth century. Even during the monarchy, attempts to specify what should be the objectives of a national history of Austria were complicated, and it became more difficult in the Republic to relate Austrian contemporary identity to the longue durée of its history. It is a question that takes us back to the role of history in society.*

**HW:** The memorial year (*Gedenkjahr*) 1988, in which the 1938 *Anschluss* of Austria to Nazi-Germany was reflected on, was a welcome occasion to carry out an analysis and in-depth discussion of *Problems of Austrian History and Its Representation*. We—you and I—co-organized a conference with this title in late autumn of 1988, where the problem of an Austrian history was discussed in comparison with questions of how to conceptualize German, Prussian, Russian, Israeli, Czech, and Slovenian history. The results of these discussions were published in the publication series of the Academy Committee for Austrian History in

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133 Juraj Šedivý (b.1971), Slovenian historian.



1991.<sup>134</sup> This committee had been entrusted with editing a multi-volume Austrian history, but had only managed to publish one co-authored volume in many years. It was also clear that this would not change in the foreseeable future. The challenge was to produce books that met high academic and scholarly standards and, at the same time, met the expectations of a wider public. Therefore, the plans for publishing a history of Austria had to progress without the committee. This was at first a point of criticism; people said that I had made a committee of the academy obsolete. But when the individual volumes of *Austrian History* appeared, one by one during the 1990s, this criticism itself became obsolete even before the series was completed in 2006.

Scholarly representations of national histories always circle around the same question: how to present historical knowledge in a manner that does justice to the sources while still arousing the interest of a wider, non-academic public and thereby contributing to the formation of an open identity. Therefore, our goal was to produce a scholarly, critical, and at the same time readable history of Austria that was “engaged and engaging” and with which people between Lake Constance and Lake Neusiedl could identify.

**WP:** *Did you discuss this ambitious program together with the other authors?*

**HW:** I repeated this or similar statements several times in writing as well as at conferences, and nobody has ever contradicted me. Fichtenau even said after our first press conference: “You are the first generation for whom Austria is so self-evident that you can write an Austrian history. Seize the opportunity!” And his colleague Heinrich Appelt<sup>135</sup> said something similar.

Already in 1987, I had published a book entitled *The Birth of Central Europe: The History of Austria Before its Genesis (378–907)*<sup>136</sup> about the

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<sup>134</sup> Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl, eds., *Probleme der Geschichte Österreichs und ihrer Darstellung*, Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für die Geschichte Österreichs der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 18 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1991).

<sup>135</sup> Heinrich Appelt (1910–98), Austrian historian.

<sup>136</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *Die Geburt Mitteleuropas: Geschichte Österreichs vor seiner Entstehung (378–907)* (Vienna: Kremayr & Scheriau, 1987).



early medieval history of the region of modern Austria with the Kre-  
mayr & Scheriau publishers, where my friend Gerhart Langthaler<sup>137</sup>  
worked as publishing director. Among many, mostly positive reactions  
to it were talks with two colleagues who soon became friends, Ernst  
Hanisch and Roman Sandgruber.<sup>138</sup> In the year of its publication, both  
said independently from each other that the *Birth* could very well also  
be the “birth” of a series of volumes on Austrian history, and that they  
would very much like to contribute to it, one on contemporary history,  
and the other on economic history.

The realization of this very ambitious project, which had already  
been formulated in the founding statutes of the IÖG in 1854, was only  
possible because the time for it had truly come. First, there were three  
basic problems that every academic publishing series encounters: One  
was to find suitable authors, a competent publisher with qualified co-  
pyeditors, as well as sufficient personal and monetary resources to  
manage all of the above. Originally, the plan was that each author  
should contribute one volume apiece, continuing what had been start-  
ed by my book *Frontiers and Spaces—The History of Austria Before its  
Genesis*,<sup>139</sup> as the reworked version of *The Birth of Central Europe* was  
then called. The initial estimate was for ten volumes, but in the end,  
there were fifteen. Finalizing the project within twelve years (1994–  
2006) would not have been possible without remaining flexible to ac-  
commodate new impulses but also to respond to difficulties. So we  
ended up with volumes that contained contributions by up to five au-  
thors. Many of the authors, about half of whom are alumni of the  
IÖG, presented themselves at the conference in 1988; a few did not live  
up to expectations and had to be replaced by new authors. I am espe-  
cially grateful to those authors who filled the gaps. Without them the  
series would have remained lacking.

In choosing a publisher we were supported again by my friend Ger-  
hart Langthaler, and we ended up working with Ueberreuter, Vienna.

<sup>137</sup> Gerhart Langthaler (b.1933).

<sup>138</sup> Roman Sandgruber (b.1947), Austrian historian.

<sup>139</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *Österreichische Geschichte*, vol. 1, 378–907: *Grenzen und Räume – Geschichte Österreichs vor seiner Entstehung* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1994).

After some changes, Johanna Rachinger<sup>140</sup> became the publishing director, and then, when she was appointed as the director of the Austrian National Library, Fritz Panzer<sup>141</sup> followed her at Ueberreuter. The cooperation with both of them was a successful and fruitful one.

However, one problem still had to be solved: the funding of the project. The minister Erhard Busek<sup>142</sup> and the city of Vienna gave generous amounts. And the rest had to be applied for from the cultural sections of each of the eight other Austrian counties—always with success. Likewise, the Austrian dioceses supported us greatly, and funds from the Austrian National Bank also contributed. In total, we received about EUR 500,000 in today's currency to fund the project. Roughly 10,000 copies of each volume of the linen edition were sold, and then the publisher decided to produce a less expensive study edition. Shortly after the publication of the complete series, a high official at the ministry told me: "With this publication you have saved the Institute of Austrian Historical Research," and then added, "until the next attempt to get rid of it."

**WP:** *The first volume of Austrian History to appear, your Frontiers and Spaces, includes the dedication: "To the Institute of Austrian Historical Research, which it is worthwhile to live and work for."*

**HW:** Again and again I have been told that I have managed my life in a way so that one thing came out of another, and so my career was basically perfect. That is true; I have achieved everything (and I mean, everything) I had ever wished for. Maybe it was sort of *occasionem oblatam tenere*, as Cicero put it.<sup>143</sup> Many of these chances, if not most of them, were offered to me in some way or another; or they simply "happened," like my position as director of the IÖG when there were simply no other competitors for the job after Heinrich Fichtenau had retired. I then managed the IÖG for nineteen years, until 2002, and I always tried to communicate that this teaching and research institu-

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<sup>140</sup> Johanna Rachinger (b.1950).

<sup>141</sup> Fritz Panzer (b.1955).

<sup>142</sup> Erhard Busek (b.1941), vice-chancellor of Austria (1991–95).

<sup>143</sup> Cicero, *Orationes Philippicae* 3.34.

tion was indispensable as a means of providing the fundamentals of our discipline and functioning as a prerequisite for developing historical traditions spanning generations, not only for medieval studies.

**WP:** *And your interest in early medieval studies also just “happened”?*

**HW:** My interest in early medieval studies also sort of arose along the way. When I initially came to university in 1952, I wanted to study the eighteenth century, for which I had been thoroughly prepared by my history teacher, Erwin Hahn. However, Fichtenau’s personality won me over for the early medieval era. One day, I asked him for a dissertation topic, and he told me to research the perceptions of Constantine the Great in the High Middle Ages. When I had finished my work, a highly esteemed article by Eugen Ewig<sup>144</sup> on the early medieval perceptions of Constantine appeared, so that my first work became known alongside that of a renowned historian. When we talked about the topic of my habilitation thesis in 1964–65 Fichtenau suggested the *Intitulatio*, an important formula of medieval charters. I began with the diplomas of the German rulers in the High Middle Ages but soon realized that in this area there were no new questions to be asked which would have sufficed for a habilitation thesis. So I went back to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages and explored the titles of kings and princes until the end of the eighth century.

When I returned from the United States in 1969 and became an associate professor, Heinrich Fichtenau and Heinrich Appelt, both full professors, were responsible for lecturing on the “actual” Middle Ages while the Early Middle Ages were left to me. I connected “my” Early Middle Ages closely to Late Antiquity and thus tried to form a new field across the boundaries of the periods, as I had encountered it in Anglophone academia and had further developed in my first two books, *Splendor Imperii* and *Intitulatio I*. Stefan Esders<sup>145</sup> from the Free University in Berlin is the only professor in the German-speaking

<sup>144</sup> Eugen Ewig (1913–2006), German historian; Eugen Ewig, “Das Bild Constantins des Grossen in den ersten Jahrhunderten des abendländischen Mittelalters,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 75 (1956): 1–46.

<sup>145</sup> Stefan Esders (b.1963), German historian.

world who holds a chair with the double designation Late Antiquity/Early Middle Ages, which is incredibly useful. Soon, I began to re-work the ethnogenetical approach of Reinhard Wenskus to overcome the germanophile tradition as well as any possible nationalist interpretation of the origins of peoples. How “political” I suddenly became with this is indicated by the often insensible, partly negative, even spiteful reactions I received to my books, but also by their apparent and ongoing attractiveness in the teaching context, their sales, and their translations into seven different languages.

I have tried to develop the fundamentals of historical enquiry by means of using the auxiliary sciences (including philology) and then to ask the questions: What does the evidence tell us, what do medieval concepts mean? In other words, I did not stop where the representatives of the “pure doctrine” (to quote Heinrich Fichtenau) stopped their research. The questions and methods that you and your students have further developed concerning text and identity were apparently attractive enough so that our “school” became international and now reaches far beyond the University of Vienna. For this I am extremely grateful.

**WP:** *And how did the other topics of your work come along?*

**HW:** *The Goths* definitely “happened.” One day in the late 1960s, Erich Zöllner returned from Munich, where he had travelled on account of problems with his book on the Franks with the publisher C. H. Beck. He was told by Ernst Peter Wieckenberg,<sup>146</sup> who later became editor-in-chief (1975–2000), to ask me if I wanted to write a book on the Goths. Because Fichtenau had always been skeptical concerning commissioned work, I consulted my father, who told me that if Mozart had not rejected commissioned work then I should not think myself to be too good for it either. So I accepted.

Many things in my life just happened, such as *The Goths*. I had an excellent history teacher and a similarly wonderful Latin teacher at secondary school. Fichtenau gave the introductory course for people with names starting with M–Z, so I became his student right from the

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<sup>146</sup> Ernst Peter Wieckenberg (b.1935).

start. The fact that I met Ladner was also pure luck, which not only gave me the incredibly productive friendship with him but also with many others who lived and live halfway around the world, and of course, indirectly with Patrick Geary. That you decided to come into my seminar room one day I could neither have foreseen nor influenced, although maybe I had more influence in getting you and others to decide to stay.

I have had a rich life full of experiences, maybe also a successful one. Even in ventures that may now seem extraordinary or dangerous I never got into life-threatening situations. Neither was I ever persecuted or forced to act questionably. My story, therefore, is neither spectacular nor full of adversity. In contrast to what happened to my slightly older contemporaries, or to people who lived in neighboring countries, I have surely been fortunate.



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# Times of Upheaval

This is a deeply moving book. It tells the story of the tenacity and quiet courage required of scholars in post-war Central Europe in their pursuit of truth in the face of state power and ideological manipulation. It also records heartening triumphs of intellectual generosity and enterprise over drab mean-mindedness and potentially toxic parochialism. It is the story of how loyalty to truth about a seemingly distant past—the Middle Ages—can still add a precious, vivid dimension to the present, and thus contribute to a wider, richer, and more nourishing vision of Europe.

*Peter Brown, Professor Emeritus of History, Princeton University*

This quartet of interviews with the four towering interpreters of the pre-modern Central Europe shows how intimately intertwined medieval scholarship and contemporary history are. In response to probing questions by their former students, each narrates how the traumas of twentieth-century war and totalitarianism shaped his life, his values, and his scholarship. These are profound and moving reflections on lifetimes of personal and scholarly engagement and indeed heroism. If, as Jerzy Kłoczowski affirmed, "History is about remembering things that are fundamental for the history of humankind," the remembrances of these figures are among those fundamentals that the present generation of historians and all people of conscience and integrity need remember.

*Patrick J. Geary, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*

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